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# THE NEW YORKER

MARCH 7, 2016

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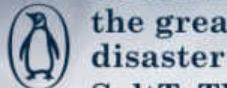
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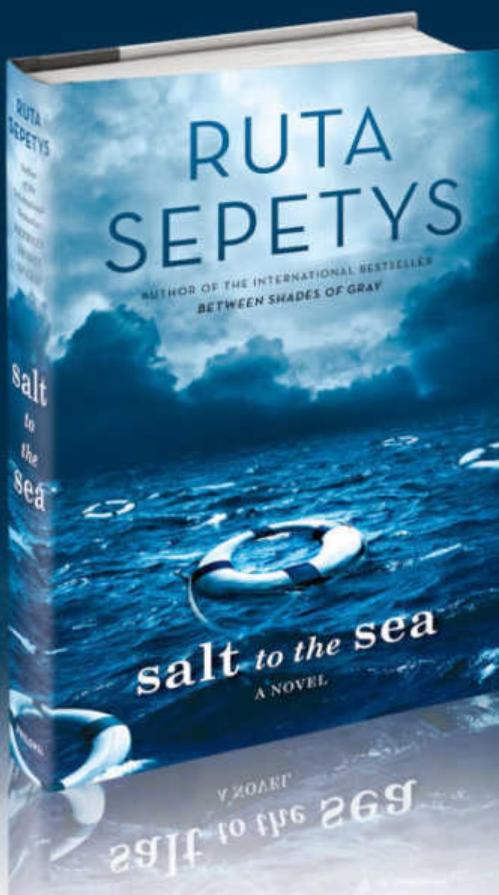
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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Dexter Filkins** (*Comment*, p. 17), the author of “The Forever War,” joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2011.

**Ian Frazier** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 20) will publish “Hogs Wild: Selected Reporting Pieces” in June.

**David Owen** (“*Dirty Hands*,” p. 22) is working on a book about water, based on his article “Where the River Runs Dry,” which appeared in the May 25, 2015, issue of the magazine.

**Seamus Heaney** (*Poem*, p. 27) was a poet and a translator, who died in 2013. His translation of Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, excerpted in this issue, will be published in the U.S. in May.

**Peter Hessler** (“*Living-Room Democracy*,” p. 30) is a staff writer living in Cairo. “Strange Stones: Dispatches from East and West” is one of his many books.

**Jen Spyra** (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 29), a former senior writer for the *Onion*, is a staff writer for “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert.”

**Rebecca Mead** (“*Learn Different*,” p. 36), the author of “My Life in Middlemarch,” has been writing for the magazine since 1997.

**Matthieu Aikins** (“*The Bidding War*,” p. 46) is a Schell Fellow at the Nation Institute. He has been reporting from Afghanistan since 2008, and won a 2013 George Polk Award for magazine reporting for his piece about war crimes in that country.

**Fiona McFarlane** (*Fiction*, p. 56) published her débüt novel, “The Night Guest,” in 2013. “The High Places,” a collection of short stories, will come out in May.

**Nathan Heller** (*Books*, p. 62) is a staff writer.

**Danny Shanahan** (*Cover*) has contributed to *The New Yorker* for nearly thirty years. His cartoons have appeared in many of the magazine’s publications, including “The New Yorker Book of Golf Cartoons.” He is currently working on illustrations for a cookbook.

**George Packer** (*Books*, p. 67) has been a staff writer since 2003. He is the author of seven books, including “The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America,” for which he won a National Book Award.

**Emily Nussbaum** (*On Television*, p. 59), *The New Yorker’s* television critic, won a 2014 National Magazine Award for columns and commentary.

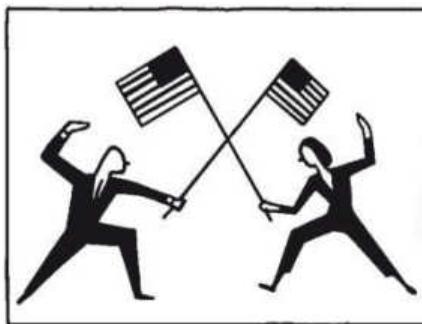
**Hua Hsu** (*Pop Music*, p. 70) will publish his first book, “A Floating Chinaman: Fantasy and Failure Across the Pacific,” in June.

**Hilton Als** (*The Theatre*, p. 72), a staff writer and a theatre critic for the magazine, is an associate professor of writing at Columbia University’s School of the Arts.

**Rae Armantrout** (*Poem*, p. 42) won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award for her poetry collection “*Versed*.” A volume of new and selected poems, “*Partly*,” is due out later this year.

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## THE NEW YORKER PRESENTS

On our new television show, a nurse in Texas works with teen-age mothers who lack support.

## SUPER TUESDAY

Amy Davidson, John Cassidy, Benjamin Wallace-Wells, and others analyze the primary results.

## COMMA QUEEN

Mary Norris discusses why the overuse of the adjective “massive” infuriates purists.

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# THE MAIL

## THE DANGER OF CHEAP OIL

James Surowiecki provides an effective tutorial on the correlation between oil-price ups and downs and the state of the stock market ("Tank-ing," February 8th & 15th). But in concluding that, on balance, low oil prices help the economy, Surowiecki stops short of making a larger point: more affordable oil may seem like a boon for the economy now, but, when climate change is taken into consideration, it will ultimately have a negative effect. Low prices stimulate an increase in oil use and an intensification in greenhouse-gas emissions. Promoting fossil-fuel consumption after the climate-change conference in Paris could damage the fragile international momentum that it fostered. The United States' proposed carbon-reduction policy focusses on power-plant coal combustion, but oil accounts for an even greater share of the nation's carbon emissions. Cheap oil isn't the curse the market seems to think it is, but it's not a blessing, either.

*Joel Darmstadter  
Washington, D.C.*

## UNCOVERING BIAS

As an educated, childless, headscarf-wearing American Muslim, I had a lot of sympathy for Elif Batuman and her relationship with Turkish culture ("Cover Story," February 8th & 15th). The warm acceptance she felt while wearing a headscarf in the conservative city of Urfa, as opposed to the sense of embattlement she experienced navigating the city with her head bare, presents the difficult choice that many women in Muslim countries must make: be autonomous and isolated, or constrained, but with a sense of belonging. Batuman observes a parallel between modern Turkey and the fictionalized version of France presented in a recent novel by Michel Houellebecq. In both cases, women are encouraged to leave the workforce,

adopting a more traditional conception of their social role and devoting their lives to child-rearing. Attempting to understand why women would accept this life, Batuman begins to see that the matter is one less of religious conviction than of demographics. As long as having a large family is equated with increasing social power, devoting one's life to motherhood will look like a religious duty. But "be fruitful and multiply" is not a Koranic dictum, and when people of faith conclude that God is better pleased with sustainability than with relentless population growth we will be free to foster a world that offers both warmth and opportunity for women.

*Rabia Terri Harris  
Stony Point, N.Y.*

## DISNEYFIED GOETHE

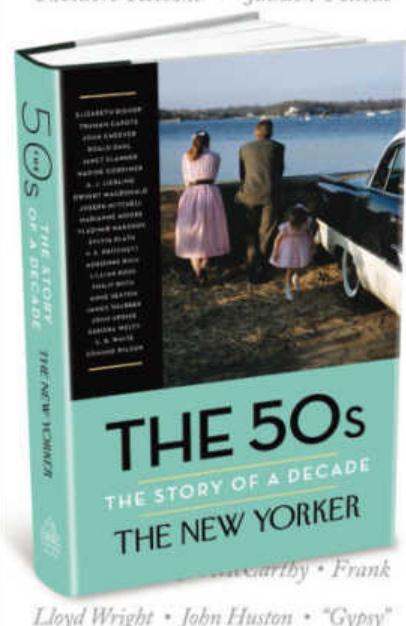
Adam Kirsch, in his piece on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's role in German literature, correctly states that most English-language readers are indifferent to poetry from other cultures ("Design for Living," February 1st). However, many of us may have been exposed to some without knowing it: anyone who has seen Disney's "Fantasia" has seen an enactment of one of Goethe's poems. "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," an orchestral piece made famous by the movie, is the best-known work of the composer Paul Dukas, and although few viewers knew at the time that the piece was based on a poem by Goethe, of the same name, it is hard to forget the army of brooms, or the eyes of the sorcerer.

*Carol Sims Prunali  
Rome, Italy*

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to [themail@newyorker.com](mailto:themail@newyorker.com). Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter or return letters.

## HISTORY IN REAL TIME AS TOLD BY THE NEW YORKER

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MARCH 2 – 8, 2016

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



New York's flourishing repertory-film scene is getting even more ambitious with the opening, this Friday, of **Metrograph**, a new two-screen venue on the Lower East Side. The theatre will offer new independent and foreign films along with classic fare, programmed by Jake Perlin and Aliza Ma. The inaugural series, "Sur-  
render to the Screen," features movies in which moviegoing looms large, including Tsai Ming-liang's "Good-  
bye, Dragon Inn," Peter Bogdanovich's "The Last Picture Show," and Brian De Palma's "Femme Fatale."

EVERETT

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA KRACHEY

# CLASSICAL MUSIC

## OPERA

### Metropolitan Opera

Otto Schenk's 2006 production of Donizetti's farce **"Don Pasquale"**—a slapstick affair created and heretofore presented as a showcase for the irresistible charms of Anna Netrebko—provides a vehicle for the company's débüt of the Italian soprano Eleonora Buratto. Joining her in the small ensemble cast are the dazzling bel cantist Javier Camarena and the baritones Ambrogio Maestri and Levente Molnár. Maurizio Benini conducts. (March 4 at 7:30.) • The company's merry-go-round of Italian opera continues with a return of Anthony Minghella's beloved 2006 production of **"Madama Butterfly,"** with Hei-Kyung Hong, a longtime house favorite, taking the title role and Gwyn Hughes Jones and Artur Rucinski as Pinkerton and Sharpless, respectively; Karel Mark Chichon. (March 2 at 7:30 and March 5 at 8:30.) • With its sufficiently stylish sets and somewhat diffuse theatrical direction, Eyre's 2014 production of **"Le Nozze di Figaro"** embraces the Met's formula for creating reliable stagings of canonical works. The ensemble cast, led by the more than capable Fabio Luisi, includes Rachel Willis-Sørensen, Anita Hartig, Isabel Leonard, Mikhail Petrenko, and, most intriguingly, Luca Pisaroni, an erstwhile—and excellent—Figaro who now takes on the lascivious Count Almaviva for the first time with the company. (March 3 and March 7 at 7:30.) • Richard Eyre's new film-noir-inspired staging of **"Manon Lescaut"** moves the action from the twilight of the ancien régime to Occupied France in the nineteen-forties, reimagining the opera's naïve and vivacious heroine as something of a femme fatale—even though the hypocritical society that condemns her bears little resemblance to the murderous moral universe of the Nazis. The disjointed production is saved, to some extent, by the two leads: Kristine Opolais, whose voice has a warm glow at its center, and Roberto Alagna, who makes up for in confidence and swagger what he lacks in pure volume and vocal color. Fabio Luisi, the Met's principal conductor, sometimes mistakes the teeming ardor of Puccini's score for simple bombast. (March 5 at 1 and March 8 at 7:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

### "West Side Story"

Carnegie Hall presents Leonard Bernstein's immortal New York City love story in a run of performances at the Knockdown Center, a converted factory space in Queens. The production, offered by a fresh young cast that features Skylar Astin (of "Pitch Perfect" fame), Morgan Hernandez, and Bianca Marroquín, blends Jerome Robbins's iconic dance sequences with new choreography from Sean Cheesman. Amanda Dehnert directs, and Marin Alsop, an expert hand in Bernstein's exultant musical idiom, conducts. (52-19 Flushing Ave., Maspeth. 212-247-7800. March 4 and March 5 at 8 and March 6 at 3.)

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

Christoph von Dohnányi, one of the last great maestros of the European postwar generation,

is nothing if not formidable in the music of Brahms—though the conductor's interpretations veer more to the rational side of a composer whom many adore for his urbane sentimentality. Always a distinguished presence at the Philharmonic, he brings his mastery to one of Brahms's supreme works, "A German Requiem," a work fashioned not from the Latin Catholic Mass but from beloved passages from the Bible. His vocal soloists are the outstanding Camilla Tilling and Matthias Goerne, backed by the New York Choral Artists. (David Geffen Hall. March 3 and March 7 at 7:30 and March 4-5 at 8.) • As the rich brown tones of Brahms recede, the brilliant colors of the music of Olivier Messiaen burst out in a series of concerts spearheaded by the orchestra's composer-in-residence, Esa-Pekka Salonen. The first program, a chamber-ensemble affair, is hosted by Salonen; it features not only works by the French master (including "Le Merle Noir," for flute and piano) but also works by three brilliant disciples, George Benjamin (the duo "Viola, Viola"), Oliver Knussen ("Autumnal," for violin and piano), and the late Pierre Boulez. (National Sawdust, 80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. March 7 at 7:30.) (nyphil.org.)

### Russian National Orchestra

New Yorkers might be forgiven for thinking that Valery Gergiev is the only Russian conductor on the international scene. There's also the dazzling Mikhail Pletnev, whose superb ensemble is dedicated, as its name implies, to giving high-octane renditions of his country's bedrock repertory. Its upcoming program at Carnegie Hall is mostly on the sweet side: Borodin's dreamy tone poem "In the Steppes of Central Asia," Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor (with a first-rate soloist, Stefan Jackiw), and Stravinsky's "Firebird" Suite (in the lean and slightly astringent 1945 orchestration). (212-247-7800. March 2 at 8.)

### Minnesota Orchestra

The taut and resonant ensemble, its labor disputes now in the rearview mirror, returns to Carnegie Hall with a long-awaited Sibelius program led by Osmo Vänskä, one of today's foremost interpreters of the composer. Here they present the late-Romantic First and the neoclassical Third, as well as the ever-popular Violin Concerto (featuring the inimitable Hilary Hahn, with her pristine, captivating sound). (212-247-7800. March 3 at 8.)

## RECITALS

### Concerts at the Italian Academy: Jay Campbell and Conor Hanick

Columbia University's outpost for Italian culture (which boasts lovely little *teatro*) has a regular run of interesting concerts. The gifted young cellist and pianist, confidants of some of New York's finest composers, offer a program of music on sacred themes, ranging from the medieval (selections from the "Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelation") to the modern (Scelsi's "Three Latin Prayers" and an excerpt from Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time"). (1161 Amsterdam Ave., between 116th and 118th Sts. March 2 at 7. No tickets required.)

### "Art of the Guitar": David Russell

The 92nd Street Y, a longtime home for first-rate guitar concerts, continues its tradition with an appearance by the Grammy-winning Scottish virtuoso, who brings with him music by Mompou, Stephen Goss (the New York première of "Cantigas de Santiago"), Bach (an arrangement of the Partita No. 1, BWV 825), and Tárrega ("Gran Jota"). (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. March 2 at 7:30.)

### Ecstatic Music Festival: Lee Ranaldo and Dither

In a concert sure to attract mavens of the electric guitar, the alt-rock veteran joins the experimental guitar quartet to perform (among other works) "Hurricane Transcriptions," a series of songs that are interspersed with transcriptions of recordings that Ranaldo made of the wind sounds that whipped through the city during Hurricane Sandy. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. March 2 at 7:30.)

### Piotr Anderszewski

The celebrated Polish pianist, renowned as much for his interpretive sensitivity as for his incisive dexterity, takes part in Lincoln Center's Great Performers series with a solo recital of music by Bach (the Partita No. 1 in B-Flat Major and the Partita No. 6 in E Minor) and Schumann (including "Papillons") as well as "Métopes," three short pieces by Szymanowski, the early-twentieth-century Impressionist master. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. March 3 at 7:30.)

### Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

The versatile and prolific violinist Daniel Hope celebrates the centenary of Yehudi Menuhin, who was Hope's friend and mentor, with a program of music for strings inspired by the great violinist that includes Bach's Double Concerto as well as works by Arvo Pärt ("Darf Ich . . .") for violin, strings, and bell), Philip Glass, Shulamit Ran, Bartók (the Romanian Dances), and Mendelssohn (the lesser-known Violin Concerto in D Minor, which Menuhin rescued from obscurity). (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. March 4 at 7:30.)

### Miller Theatre "Composer Portrait": Iancu Dumitrescu

To survive as a spectralist composer—exploring, by scientific means, the timbral aspects of pure sound—in Ceaușescu's Cold War Romania must have been akin to being a Protestant in seventeenth-century Rome. So give Miller Theatre credit for providing some worthy New York exposure to one of that movement's admired leaders in a performance by Richard Carrick's sterling ensemble Either/Or that includes the world or U.S. premières of such works as "Galaxy," "Silence d'Or," and "Ultrasonic Sublime." (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. March 5 at 8.)

### Music at the Frick Collection: Andreas Staier

A recital series that often features the New York débuts of up-and-coming artists devotes its next concert to an eminent figure of the European period-performance scene. Music, mostly of the early Baroque period, from suites and collections by Froberger, d'Anglebert, Clérambault, and Louis Couperin will be performed by the German harpsichordist in a program that reflects the aesthetic of his Gramophone Award-winning album "Pour Passer la Mélancholie." (E. 70th St. 212-547-0715. March 6 at 5.)

# THE THEATRE



A new show draws from Rimbaud's "Illuminations," written during his affair with Verlaine.

## Poetry in Motion

John Ashbery's translation of Rimbaud provides inspiration for the *Civilians*.

"COLLECTED FRENCH TRANSLATIONS," the two-volume edition of the poet and critic John Ashbery's work as a sensitive translator of French verse and criticism, published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in 2014, is essential reading not only if you're interested in the esteemed poet but also if you share his interest in French cultural figures, ranging from Baudelaire to Redon and beyond. As a boy growing up in up-state New York, Ashbery was entranced by distant relatives who lived abroad. The glamour of expatriation was formative. In high school and, later, at Harvard, the burgeoning writer studied French and was excellent at it; he moved to France on a Fulbright in 1955, and lived in a number of towns before finally settling in Paris.

Making a living was tough but not impossible. In 1960, Ashbery joined the staff of the *International Herald-Tribune*. He wrote about art, and about the milieu that helped inform the work of such French masters as Toulouse-Lautrec. After ten

years in France, Ashbery returned to New York, where he continues to live, surrounded by poets young and old, who learn from him and take heart—language can change your life in more ways than one.

Working from Ashbery's translation of Rimbaud, the *Civilians*, a Brooklyn-based theatre collective, have put together a new piece, "Rimbaud in New York" (at BAM Fisher, March 1-6). The socially concerned group, under the direction of Steve Cosson, uses songs and prose to investigate, among other works, Rimbaud's dense and wild "Illuminations," written during his relationship with the poet Paul Verlaine. The play is about myths, to be sure, but it's also concerned with the pleasure of the text and emotions and thoughts that words can and cannot illuminate. Ashbery not only captures that French renegade's intensity and playfulness in his translation, he does so with an urgency that reminds us that Rimbaud left the form that he helped create—modernism—as a disenchanted young man, while Ashbery, never a cynic, works in his own vibrant space, one that goes on and on.

—Hilton Als

### Blackbird

Jeff Daniels and Michelle Williams star in David Harrower's Olivier-winning drama, about two people who reconnect years after their relationship, which took place when he was forty and she was twelve. (*Belasco*, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. *In previews.*)

### Bright Star

Steve Martin and Edie Brickell wrote this bluegrass and Americana musical, in which a magazine editor meets a soldier returning from the Second World War. Walter Bobbie directs. (*Cort*, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. *In previews.*)

### The Crucible

Ivo van Hove directs Arthur Miller's classic drama about the Salem witch trials, starring Saoirse Ronan, Ben Whishaw, Ciarán Hinds, and Sophie Okonedo. (*Walter Kerr*, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. *In previews.*)

### Disaster!

This new jukebox musical, set on a floating casino-cum-disco, lampoons nineteen-seventies disaster movies. The cast includes Kerry Butler, Adam Pascal, Faith Prince, and Seth Rudetsky, who co-wrote the book with the director, Jack Plotnick. (*Nederlander*, 208 W. 41st St. 866-870-2717. *In previews. Opens March 8.*)

### Eclipsed

Lupita Nyong'o stars in a Broadway transfer of Danai Gurira's drama, which ran last fall at the Public, about a group of women held captive during Liberia's second civil war. (*Golden*, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. *In previews. Opens March 6.*)

### The Effect

In Lucy Prebble's play, directed by David Cromer, two subjects of a pharmaceutical trial develop feelings for each other that may be the product of side effects. (*Barrow Street Theatre*, 27 Barrow St. 212-868-4444. *In previews.*)

### Familiar

Rebecca Taichman directs a play by Danai Gurira, in which a Zimbabwean family living in Minnesota is torn about the observance of an African bridal custom. (*Playwrights Horizons*, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. *In previews. Opens March 3.*)

### Hold On to Me Darling

In Kenneth Lonergan's play, directed by Neil Pepe, a country-music star (Timothy Olyphant) moves back to his Tennessee home town after his mother's death. (*Atlantic Theatre Company*, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111. *In previews.*)

### Hungry

Richard Nelson directs the first installment of his three-play cycle, "The Gabriels," which will follow the 2016 election year in the life of a fictional Rhinebeck family. (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. *In previews. Opens March 4.*)

### Ideation

Aaron Loeb's thriller, directed by Josh Costello, is about a group of corporate consultants working on an enigmatic and morally dubious project. (*59E59*, 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. *Previews begin March 5.*)

### Ironbound

Marin Ireland stars in Martyna Majok's play, directed by Daniella Topol, which follows an immi-

grant cleaning woman's dealings with men over the course of twenty-two years. (*Rattlestick*, 224 Waverly Pl. 866-811-4111. *Previews begin March 3.*)

### Red Speedo

In Lucas Hnath's play, directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, an Olympic hopeful copes with the pressure of competition on the eve of swim trials. (*New York Theatre Workshop*, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475. *In previews. Opens March 3.*)

### The Robber Bridegroom

Steven Pasquale plays a Mississippi bandit in the Roundabout's revival of the 1975 musical, based on a short story by Eudora Welty and directed by Alex Timbers. (*Laura Pels*, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. *In previews.*)

### The Royale

Marco Ramirez's play, directed by Rachel Chavkin, tells the story of a black heavyweight boxing champion (based on Jack Johnson) in six rounds. (*Mitzi E. Newhouse*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. *In previews. Opens March 7.*)

### She Loves Me

Laura Benanti and Zachary Levi star in the 1963 musical, with lyrics by Sheldon Harnick and music by Jerry Bock, in which two employees at a perfume shop are unaware that they are romantic pen pals. (*Studio 54*, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300. *In previews.*)

### Southern Comfort

This new folk- and bluegrass-inflected musical, directed by Thomas Caruso, is based on a 2001 documentary about a group of transgender friends living in rural Georgia. (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. *In previews. Opens March 8.*)

### White Rabbit Red Rabbit

The Iranian writer Nassim Soleimanpour's one-person play will be performed by a rotating cast of celebrities, who will be handed the script in an envelope, sight unseen. Participants include Nathan Lane, Whoopi Goldberg, Cynthia Nixon, and Martin Short. (*Westside*, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200. *Opens March 7. Monday nights.*)

### Widowers' Houses

David Staller directs the George Bernard Shaw comedy, presented by the Actors Company Theatre and Gingold Theatrical Group, in which a doctor falls in love with a slum landlord's daughter. (*Beckett*, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. *In previews.*)

## NOW PLAYING

### Buried Child

The New Group doesn't dig too deep in its revival of Sam Shepard's Pulitzer Prize winner. On a farmstead somewhere in Illinois, a dying patriarch (Ed Harris), his falsely genteel wife (Amy Madigan), and their two damaged adult children (Paul Sparks and Rich Sommer) live in disharmony. This uneasy equilibrium shifts when a grandson (Nat Wolff) arrives with his girlfriend (Taissa Farmiga), both curious about the family history. Meanwhile, a barren field yields up corn, carrots, and long-interred secrets. The performances are varied, though Harris's Dodge is masterful in his degraded, failing authority. Scott Elliott's production ably captures Shepard's sense of humor, which impishly traipses a line between naturalism and absurdity and neatly conveys the distance between the apple-pie illusion and the gothic reality. But what's missing is a sense

of underlying menace, the horror rippling below the comic surface. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

### Dot

Dotty (Marjorie Johnson) is sixty-five, an outspoken West Philadelphia grandmother who was "a feminist before there was a word for it." She's also struggling with Alzheimer's, which occasionally leaves her in the middle of her kitchen, wondering why she's there. The actor-playwright Colman Domingo wrote this kitchen-sink portrait of a black middle-class family dealing with the strain and sadness of dementia, with Dotty's grown children squabbling over the way forward: Shelly (Sharon Washington), a hot-tempered lawyer; Bonnie (Stephen Conrad Moore), a gay man on a juice cleanse; and Averie (Libya V. Pugh), a broke YouTube star. Domingo's script is sitcom-broad—spit takes, gay jokes—and the director, Susan Stroman, sets the pace at extra caffeinated. The result is often loud and trite, with the exception of a fanciful Act II dance sequence that plays to Stroman's great gift for whimsy. (*Vineyard*, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

### Her Requiem

The writing of a musical composition for the dead—a project accomplished almost entirely off-stage—constitutes the surprisingly moving central action of Greg Pierce's new family drama, directed by Kate Whoriskey for LCT3. Caitlin, a seventeen-year-old musical prodigy on hiatus from high school, holes up in her family's wood-beamed, quilt-bedecked Vermont home, constructing a "Dies Irae" with the help of her (dubiously helpful) collaborator, Tommy. Outside her bedroom door, things fall apart: her parents fight about her well-being; her grandmother's health deteriorates. A strange gathering of requiem enthusiasts—goths, apocalyptic environmentalists—hold vigil for her in the barn. Both death and artistic creation, Pierce eloquently shows, disrupt ordinary life, insisting on their own rhythms and realities, their own methods of belief. How much space we give them is a reflection of what we think ordinary life should be. (*Claire Tow*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Nice Fish

The great Shakespearean actor Mark Rylance is English-born but grew up in Wisconsin, and he seems as enamored of the plainspoken patois of the Great Lakes as he is of Elizabethan verse. Rylance and the Duluth poet Louis Jenkins adapted this surreal charmer of a show from Jenkins's book of prose poems. On a frozen lake (gorgeously realized by Todd Rosenthal's telescopic set), two ice fishermen (Rylance and Jim Lichtscheidt) pass the hours drinking beer, building snowmen, and soliloquizing on past loves and present winds. Like Vladimir and Estragon, they're joined by occasional visitors, including a state official, whose recitation of fishing bylaws becomes its own peculiar poetry. As directed by Claire van Kampen, the show sometimes struggles to uproot itself from the page, but its visual language, wed to Jenkins's, is stunning: you can practically feel the salmon swimming underfoot. (*St. Ann's Warehouse*, 45 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779.)

### Pericles

Until this sweeping, majestic Theatre for a New Audience production, Trevor Nunn, the former artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre in London (and the director, here, of "Cats," "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby," and "Les Misérables"), had tackled thirty-four of the thirty-

seven Shakespeare plays, but never one with an American company, and never "Pericles." Shakespeare's full authorship is up for scholarly debate, and it's certainly an odd duck of a play, neither comedy nor tragedy but rather a fantastic, episodic adventure following the title character (Christian Camargo) through six ancient kingdoms. The odyssey involves quests, riddles, romance, kidnapping, shipwrecks, a brothel, treachery, honor, despair, and miraculous reunions. The stage of the Polonsky Shakespeare Center is used to full magical, theatrical effect, with music, dance, and pageantry all contributing to the glow. (262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111.)

### Smokefall

"Every life is just a little bit of noise between two silences," a character in Noah Haidle's wistful, wispy drama says. And every play is just a little bit of chatter between applause. Haidle's, at MCC, is more fanciful than most, but slighter than many, particularly when it strains toward philosophy. The first act opens sometime in the middle of the last century, as a suburban family fractures. The second, set eighty-four years later, achieves a reunion of sorts, although one character arrives as a pile of bones crammed into a suitcase. (An Act II curtain raiser, set inside a womb, is the evening's highlight.) Under Anne Kauffman's direction, on Mimi Lien's typically canny set, there are some distinguished performances, particularly by Zachary Quinto, as both a Sondheim-loving fetus and a narrator named Footnote. But this magical-realist work is ultimately less than the sum of its aphorisms. (*Lucille Lortel*, 121 Christopher St. 212-352-3101.)

### Women Without Men

Hazel Ellis joined the acting company of Dublin's Gate Theatre in 1929. Less than a decade later, she emerged as a playwright, penning two very successful dramas before retiring from the world of professional theatre, at age thirty. This is the second of those two plays, first produced in 1938. Featuring an all-female cast of eleven, the impressive ensemble piece is set in a posh private girls' school. All the action takes place in the teachers' lounge—perfect for dramatic entrances and sultry exits. In the school's insular, highly regulated environment, the teaching staff are all leading lives of not so quiet desperation, and petty jealousies sometimes lead to serious insults. The plot, especially in the second act, tends toward melodrama, but the Mint's uniformly fine players, directed by Jenn Thompson, get to sink their teeth into a range of juicy character roles. (*City Center Stage II*, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

## ALSO NOTABLE

**An American in Paris** Palace. • **The Body of an American** Cherry Lane. • **Boy** Clurman. • **The Burial at Thebes** DR2. *Through March 6.* • **The Color Purple** Jacobs. • **Dry Powder** Public. • **Fiddler on the Roof** Broadway Theatre. • **Fun Home** Circle in the Square. • **Hamilton** Richard Rodgers. • **Hughie** Booth. (*Reviewed in this issue.*) • **The Humans** Helen Hayes. • **Mike Birbiglia: Thank God for Jokes** Lynn Redgrave. • **Noises Off** American Airlines Theatre. • **Old Hats** Pershing Square Signature Center. • **Our Mother's Brief Affair** Samuel J. Friedman. *Through March 6.* • **Prodigal Son** City Center Stage I. • **School of Rock** Winter Garden. • **Sense & Sensibility** Gym at Judson. • **Smart People** Second Stage. *Through March 6.* • **Straight Acorn**. • **The Wildness: Sky-Pony's Rock Fairy Tale** Ars Nova.

# ART

## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

### Brooklyn Museum

"This Place"

When the French photographer Frédéric Brenner invited eleven colleagues (including such big names as Jeff Wall and Thomas Struth) to join him in documenting Israel and the West Bank, he was hoping for pictures that, in his words, "reflected the complexity of the place, with all its rifts and paradoxes." The exhibition is, perhaps inevitably, a mixed bag, but the range of styles and stances is one of its strengths. Some of the most engaging projects deal with the complexity head-on. Wendy Ewald gave cameras to groups (Israeli soldiers, Bedouin schoolchildren, Domari Gypsies) and exhibits the resulting snapshots in grids that pit commonalities against differences. Family and community are key themes in work by Brenner, Nick Waplington, and Rosalind Fox Solomon, but landscapes predominate, most powerfully in Josef Koudelka's imposing panoramas of the wall in East Jerusalem, seen from both the Israeli and the Palestinian side. The photographers, nearly all outsiders investigating the territory for the first time, avoid polarizing clichés and discover something tantalizingly close to common ground. *Through June 5.*

### Neue Galerie

"Munch and Expressionism"

For more than a century, Munch's reputation has circled the canon of modern art like a big plane seeking a runway. He is famous, sure, for the flayed, undulating figure of existential panic in "The Scream" (1893) and for a few other images, touching on love and death, from the first, rock-star-like decade of his career. But the subsequent, prolific glories of the Norwegian painter, who lived until 1944, are little recognized. This exciting show settles his one textbook claim to historical consequence: he is the father of Expressionism, the most important modern movement in German and, to some extent, Austrian art. Powerful Expressionist works in the show, such as Ludwig Kirchner's sensational touchstone, "Street, Dresden" (1908), perform like an honor guard for forty-seven Munchs, including the artist's 1895 pastel copy of "The Scream." (This picture was briefly the costliest art work ever sold at auction, when it fetched nearly a hundred and twenty million dollars, in 2012.) The Expressionist whom Munch liked most was Emil Nolde, another thornily independent spirit, who is represented in the show by a large lithograph, "Young Danish Woman" (1913), and three hand-colored repetitions of it: works of fantastic intensity, with distorted features and dissonant colors, that dare unusual ugliness to take unusual beauty by surprise. But even Nolde—who, incidentally, fell prey to Nazi sympathies, as Munch did not—tends toward generality in what he expresses. Munch specifies. His example to other artists is simple, really: be a highly gifted but, especially, a particular person, and go for broke. *Through June 13.*

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

### William Gedney

The New York photographer was championed by the pioneering photography curator John Szarkowski and compared to Walker Evans, but when he died, in 1989, at the age of fifty-six, his work was essentially unknown. Gedney remains a cult figure—fondly remembered, regularly rediscovered—and this excellent, compact survey suggests some reasons why. His black-and-white pictures, made mostly in the sixties and seventies, are small, quiet, and intensely personal—a delicate balance of careful observation and genuine feeling, most evident in the pictures he took of a Kentucky coal miner's extended family, subjects he eyed with the mixture of empathy and restraint that was his trademark. *Through March 19.* (Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010.)

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Karen Kilimnik

New little pictures by the elfin artist pose a test: when is Kilimnik enchanting and when twee? Start with cat stickers on photographs of canopy beds, captioned with cute remarks of the felines. They may pain even cat nuts, never mind the cat nats among us. Then regard nice enough collages that take dreamy inspiration from Renaissance and baroque art. But enter a curtained, dim, chandeliered room and behold four ravishing glitter-enhanced paintings of fanciful woodland scenes with men and horses: the magical right stuff. *Through March 26.* (303 Gallery, 507 W. 24th St. 212-255-1121.)

### Ana Mendieta

With a reputation that has been slowly building since her violent death, at the age of thirty-six, in 1985, Mendieta now verges on canonical, for her implicitly feminist, jolting performance-based art. Ten short films and some videos, from her student years at the University of Iowa, herald a fiercely original talent. Blood is seen trickling down the artist's face from an imperceptible source, and clotted on a sidewalk, where it's mostly ignored by secretly filmed passers-by. A weather balloon explodes and releases a small blizzard of turkey feathers. Mendieta asks schoolchildren to define the soul. One girl guesses that it's like a rubber band that stretches as you grow, until "you get too big and it snaps, and you die." *Through March 26.* (Galerie Lelong, 528 W. 26th St. 212-315-0470.)

### Pope.L / Will Boone

When an exhibition pairs a venerable artist with a young hotshot, it can feel like a bid for reputation inflation. But, in this smart double bill, works by the up-and-coming Boone (best known as a painter) and the veteran Pope.L, (a genre-defying provocateur) are mutually beneficial. Pope.L, who won raves for his retrospective at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art last year, shows videos, sculptures, and stencilled canvases that balance humor and politics. (Two small paintings read "white cop, whiter donut.") Boone has less edge but just as much flair. Big striped paint-

ings, in white or red on black, are striking, if a bit zombie-formalist. But boxes lined with shattered mirrors and magazine clippings, and a vinyl seat salvaged from the cab of a truck, share Pope.L's Rabelaisian vision. *Through March 5.* (Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 212-627-6000.)

### Mickalene Thomas

The painter's irresistible photographs mix blaxploitation sass with art-historical references (odaliscs abound). They're accompanied by a delirious sculptural tableau of a living-room and a savvy selection of works by other photographers who have inspired Thomas, from Malick Sidibe to Renee Cox. The aesthetic is pattern-on-pattern, sometimes collaged but more often a riot of clashing clothing, wallpaper, and upholstery that suggests Matisse let loose in a thrift store. The show is audaciously kitschy, pointedly celebratory, and not to be missed. *Through March 17.* (Aperture, 547 W. 27th St. 212-505-5555.)

### Fred Tomaselli

Early works show what excellent gimcrackery the New York artist was up to before settling on his evilly decorative embedments of cannabis leaves and other intoxicants (pills, mostly) in resin. To activate "Geology Lesson" (1986), you sit in a chair and depress a foot pedal. Eighty-four small conical speakers, facing up or a table, buzz as little piles of cat litter jiggle in them. For "Current Theory" (1984), a hundred and seventy-nine Styrofoam cups, tethered to a blue tarp on the floor, perform ballerically in breezes provided by electric fans. An artist this inventive might have gone on to do anything. Might he still? *Through March 19.* (Cohan, 533 W. 26th St. 212-714-9500.)

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

### Thomas Bayle

For half a century, the German artist has used repetition and wit to reflect a media-saturated world increasingly dominated by speed and technology. In his cinematic works, highways coalesce into a Brancusi-like head (in a black-and-white loop from 1988-89) or fracture into a scrolling collage that coheres into a medieval Crucifixion (in a color piece from 2006). Four recent paintings, in which Caravaggio's "Inspiration of St. Matthew" is made up of hundreds of iPhones, might appear glib if they were made by a younger artist. But in the context of Bayle's films they suggest an attempt to make peace with art's diminished place in a world dominated by digitization. *Through March 13.* (Brown, 291 Grand St. 212-627-5258.)

## GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

### Lili Reynaud-Dewar

In a rousing pair of projected videos, the French artist strips off her clothes, paints herself red, and dances through two exhibition spaces in Venice. She appears at once free and weirdly artificial—at times, her crimson body looks almost computer-generated. If it sounds sybaritic, it's worth noting that the artist's recent works have touched on themes of queer sexuality and AIDS. Here she invokes Walt Whitman, reciting his poem, "I Sing the Body Electric," over a grinding techno score, while performing her danse macabre. *Through March 6.* (Clearing, 396 Johnson Ave., Bushwick. 718-456-0396.)

# NIGHT LIFE

## ROCK AND POP

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

### Leon Bridges

The Texas-born Bridges has found a shortcut to such benchmarks as a Grammy nomination and an audience with President Barack Obama: the twenty-six-year-old harkens back to the heartland soul of the nineteen-fifties and sixties. "Lisa Sawyer" was a go-to number in his open-mike days; written about his mother's journey to Christ as a teen-ager, the song ended up on Bridges's débüt album, "Coming Home," and is exemplary of the dynamic storytelling that can take soul music beyond the love song. His lyrics are affectionate enough to make Cooke and Redding proud, and his youth leaves him time to live through more tales. (*Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 212-465-6500. March 7 and March 9.*)

### D.J. Harvey

Harvey Bassett came of age in England in the late nineteen-seventies, amid pivotal musical and political scenes. Punk and disco germinated alongside oil shocks, bloody culture wars, and seismic shifts in government. The climate made him fearless of change, and sent him looking for more of it: namely, the neighboring hip-hop explosion, during a trip to New York City. Soon Bassett was spending hours (up to eight a night) behind decks in London, Cambridge, and Bristol, playing everything from the Pop Group to the Fat Boys. He's since become infamous for his marathon sets, and takes the reins at Output this week from open to close. (*74 Wythe Ave., Brooklyn. outputclub.com. March 4.*)

### Talib Kweli

Raised in Park Slope with parents in academia and enjoying a healthy diet of De la Soul and Jungle Brothers, the rapper Kweli was well equipped to astutely narrate the social and political causes that animate his early work. It's a beat he shared with many peers, including his rhyming partner Yasiin Bey—then called Mos Def. Bey and Kweli formed the duo Black Star to release their first record, in 1998. But Kweli's truly inimitable moments find him boosted by craftsmen producers like Hi-Tek ("The Blast") and Kanye West ("Get By"). He'll revisit enduring hits with a live band during this two-night residency. (*Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. March 2-3.*)

### Prince Rama

This two-piece "now age" art band was founded by the sisters Taraka and Nimali Larson, who were raised in a Hare Krishna commune in Florida, and play music that makes their origin story seem tame. Following the high concept of their previous releases (imaginary Top 10 pop compilations, whimsical musical theatre), "Xtreme Now" is touted by Prince Rama and Carpark Records as the world's first extreme-sports genre album. They imagine a carbonated future where daredevil stunts are championed as the peak of human performance and valued like timeless works of art. The tunes are just as colorfully lofty: "Bahia" is high-fructose disco pop that could've been the

score for your favorite Saturday-morning cartoon. (*Baby's All Right, 146 Broadway, Brooklyn. 718-599-5800. March 4.*)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

### "Moonglow: The Magic of Benny Goodman"

There had been earlier examples of recording sessions that brought together white and African-American jazz musicians, but few had the public impact of Benny Goodman's 1936 recording of "Moonglow," which featured the drummer Gene Krupa, along with the pianist Teddy Wilson and the vibraphonist Lionel Hampton. Celebrating the formation of that epochal quartet and Goodman's subsequent small-group music of the era will be a host of players including the pianist Christian Sands and the sibling clarinet virtuosos Pete and Will Anderson. (*The Appel Room, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. March 4.*)

### Ivan Neville: Piano Sessions

The son of a vocal legend (Aaron Neville) and a noted support player for Keith Richards and Bonnie Raitt, among others, the keyboardist, singer, and songwriter Ivan Neville is a formidable talent in his own right. At the helm of a lean trio, Neville will offer a panoramic overview of his

various musical obsessions that should include a tasty helping of fancy New Orleans piano tickling. (*Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. March 4-6.*)

### Clarence Penn Birthday Bash

If the drummer Clarence Penn is involved, a band's rhythm is in the surest of hands. For a birthday treat, the deft percussionist stocks a quartet with such equally assured figures as the saxophonist Chris Potter and the pianist Manuel Valera. (*Jazz at Kitano, 66 Park Ave., at 38th St. 212-885-7119. March 3.*)

### Marc Ribot's Los Cubanos Postizos

This brilliant guitarist can be found on recordings by a swath of musicians ranging from John Mellencamp to John Zorn, and his ability to play anything imaginable and have it come out sounding unimaginable may be why. Ribot's own eclectic projects include this joyously scrambled fusion ensemble, which confirms his fondness for vintage Cuban music, untraditionally performed. (*Le Poisson Rouge, 158 Bleecker St. 212-505-3474. March 4.*)

### Molly Ringwald

The characters she inhabited in the beloved John Hughes teen flicks of the eighties displayed so much fortitude and pluck that it's hard not to imagine that Molly Ringwald didn't call on her inner Brat Packer when, in middle age, it came time to reinvent herself as a jazz-inflected vocalist. Her 2013 album, "Except Sometimes," revealed her taste for superior composers (Sondheim, Loesser, Carmichael) and even found space for a revised "Don't You (Forget About Me)." (*Birdland, 315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. March 1-5.*)

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# MOVIES



Lilyan Tashman is the center of attention at the wild party exuberantly staged by Ernst Lubitsch in "So This Is Paris," screening March 12 at Film Forum.

## Love and Freedom

*The energetic actresses of Hollywood's Jazz Age let loose.*

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, the poet laureate of the Jazz Age, ascribed the loosening of American sexual mores to teen-agers' acquisition of automobiles during the First World War. But it took Hollywood another decade to depict those new freedoms, and movies featuring a new generation of actresses who incarnated them—and of the directors who showcased them—will screen in Film Forum's series "It Girls: Flappers, Jazz Babes & Vamps" (March 11-24).

One of the earliest films in the series, Ernst Lubitsch's silent comedy "So This Is Paris," from 1926 (screening March 12), showed what a German émigré could teach Hollywood about sex. It stars the vivacious actresses Lilyan Tashman and Patsy Ruth Miller, as pleasure-seekers whose attentions stray to each other's husband. Suzanne Giraud (Miller), the wife of a prominent doctor and a fan of Orientalized romances, is aroused by the sight of a neighbor, Maurice Lalle (George

Beranger), a shirtless actor in sheikh's garb, sitting at his window. Her husband, Dr. Paul Giraud (Monte Blue), pays Maurice a visit—to pummel him with a walking stick—and falls for the actor's coquettish wife, Georgette (Tashman).

At a time when psychoanalysis was coming into vogue in the United States, Lubitsch devised uproarious Freudian sight gags (including a dream sequence in which Paul takes the walking stick into his mouth) that revealed sexual desire lurking in banal corners of life. The director also showed lust bursting forth with the free-spirited brio of the era, as when Paul sneaks off with Georgette to a rowdily high-toned Charleston bash straight out of "The Great Gatsby." From the choreographic exultation of hectic crowds filmed at sharply energized angles, Lubitsch shifts to a prismatic clash of special effects that conjures an inner whirl of orgiastic frenzy. There, Georgette, fresh from dancing on the table, offers "a toast to love and freedom," but, as the party slouches into sloppily cavalier blunders, the comedy veers toward tragedy, which Lubitsch sketches

with a bittersweet Mozarcean lyricism.

As Anita Loos, a leading silent-era screenwriter, notes in her autobiography "Kiss Hollywood Goodbye," the 1929 stock-market crash sent kept women, or "gold diggers," into the workforce, often as models and actresses. The crash coincided with the rise of talking pictures, and of musicals. The best of them—those featuring production numbers by Busby Berkeley—sparked a trend for backstage stories about actresses' efforts to make a living as money for shows was drying up. One such comedy, "Gold Diggers of 1933" (March 20), stars the fast-talking trio of Joan Blondell, Ruby Keeler, and Aline MacMahon as struggling chorines in search of paying jobs and even more lucrative marriages. Berkeley's opening and closing numbers, "We're in the Money" and "Remember My Forgotten Man," are pageants of economic trouble, but the main source of his kaleidoscopic ingenuity is sexual, from the viscous undulations of "Shadow Waltz" to the brazen eroticism of "Pettin' in the Park."

—Richard Brody

## OPENING

**Cemetery of Splendor** Reviewed in Now Playing. *Opening March 4. (In limited release.)* • **Knight of Cups** Terrence Malick directed this drama, about a Hollywood screenwriter (Christian Bale) facing an existential crisis. Co-starring Natalie Portman and Cate Blanchett. *Opening March 4. (In limited release.)* • **Songs My Brothers Taught Me** Chloe Zhao directed this drama, about the daily lives of Lakota teen-agers on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, in South Dakota. *Opening March 2. (Film Forum.)* • **Whiskey Tango Foxtrot** Reviewed in Now Playing. *Opening March 4. (In wide release.)*

## NOW PLAYING

**Cemetery of Splendor**

This political ghost story by the director Apichatpong Weerasethakul is set in an improvised military hospital in rural Thailand, where a bunch of young male soldiers who've fallen into a seemingly permanent sleep are warehoused. Doctors attempt high-tech therapy involving colored lights, while a woman who claims to be a psychic interprets the patients' desires and dreams for their families. Jen (Jenjira Pongpas Widner), a local resident and volunteer nurse, visits the hospital; her empathetic powers awaken one soldier named Itt, whom she befriends. Jen is also visited by two young women who claim to be age-old princesses and assert that the hospital was built on an ancient battleground where warring kings of yore are continuing their fight with the souls of the sleeping soldiers as proxies. Then the psychic channels Itt's visions, and her friendship with Jen takes on an erotic tone. Weerasethakul films the Thai landscape and village spaces, their tones of light and color, with a poised and painterly eye, keeping the camera still and the action quiet as if to invite elusive spirits to inhabit the image. He films the trappings of modernity with a wry aversion, capturing the paradoxes of progress while advancing a mild poetic nostalgia. In Thai.—Richard Brody (*In limited release.*)

**Cracking Up**

Jerry Lewis's last feature film to date, from 1983, lives up to its title in ways that seem painfully intentional. He stars as the nebbishy Warren Neff, whose bleak identity is defined by the opening scenes, in which he tries and fails to commit suicide. (The attempts run throughout the film, in set pieces that are among his best ever.) In despair, Warren sees a psychiatrist (Herb Edelman), whose lame and craven methods only deepen his abyss. The comic tragedy is a bourgeois nightmare: out of work, alone, unloved, physically defenseless, spiritually unmoored, clinically clumsy, devoid of charm, Warren is condemned to life with nothing but the weight of his dark memories. Lewis plays multiple characters (including Warren's hapless ancestors and an inept guru), all equally damned—but Warren's deliverance comes from a word that also serves as the film's alternate title, "Smorgasbord," which, through the plot's tenuous tricks, comes to represent nothing less than a clean slate of identity (and winks at the story's slapdash construction). But, for all the occasionally forced antics, Lewis's repeated "goodbyes" whispered directly into the camera are pleas—sincere, pathetic, and unrequited—to be called back from the void.—R.B. (*MOMA; March 8 and March 13.*)

**The Long Day Closes**

In this exquisite, impressionistic, largely autobiographical reverie, from 1993, the British director Terence Davies celebrates, with meticulous grace, a Liverpool boyhood in 1955-56. The tender, introverted eleven-year-old protagonist, Bud Davies (Leigh McCormack), is nurtured in a milieu of working-class gentility by his widowed mother and his three elder siblings (two brothers and a sister). Bud's imagination is haunted by movies and music (and the soundtrack features a flood of snippets ranging from Debbie Reynolds and the Platners to "The Magnificent Ambersons" and Mahler's Tenth), as well as by his family's Catholicism. His favorite position is seated and musing, whether on a staircase or at a window, with a perpetual half smile on his lips as he savors the view and his own refined sensations. A nocturnal family stroll through a carnival takes on the air of a solemn religious procession, and a breathtaking set of overhead tracking shots through a church and a movie theatre suggests the essential unity of Bud's passions—and their equally strong exaltation of daily life. Davies resurrects footfalls and shadows, the pattern and texture of carpets, the sound of his mother's singing voice—the sort of undramatic things that are lodged in memory for a lifetime.—R.B. (*Metrograph; March 5-6.*)

**Race**

This historical drama about Jesse Owens's glory years, from his 1933 arrival at Ohio State as a rising track-and-field star to his triumphs at the Berlin Olympics of 1936, is a wallpaper-thin but sentimentally effective hagiography. Stephan James brings steadfast purpose and quiet humor to his performance as Owens, who arrives on campus in order to be trained by the great coach Larry Snyder (Jason Sudeikis) but is greeted with racist catcalls and locker-room aggressions. Snyder imbues Owens with a new set of skills and a single-minded focus on gold medals, but the athlete's sudden fame brings distractions—mainly a glamorous young woman (Chantel Riley) whose attentions cause trouble with his fiancée, Ruth Solomon (Shanice Banton). The wide-ranging action is filled with naïvely high-relief historical cameos, including the U.S. Olympic Committee chairman Avery Brundage (Jeremy Irons), who resisted a boycott of Hitler's games; Joseph Goebbels (Barnaby Metschurat), who stage-managed them; Leni Riefenstahl (Carice van Houten), who preserved them on film; and Luz Long (David Kross), the German athlete who befriended Owens there. Though the simplistically foregrounded action whitewashes the benching, in Berlin, of two Jewish-American relay runners, its steady drumbeat of attention to the era's racial and religious hatreds invests the drama with an unrelenting forward motion.—R.B. (*In wide release.*)

**Whiskey Tango Foxtrot**

Tina Fey gets out of rom-com jail in this brisk and blustery comic drama, based on a memoir by Kim Barker, about the making and unmaking of a war correspondent. Fey plays a fictionalized version of Barker named Kim Baker, a back-bench network news writer in New York who, in 2003, takes an offer to go to Afghanistan as an onscreen reporter. Based in Kabul, embedded with Marines under the command of a crusty colonel (Billy Bob Thornton), Kim learns the ropes while socializing hard in the so-called Kabubble—notably, with Tanya (Margot Robbie), a friendly competitor; Iain (Martin Freeman), a randy one; Fahim (Christopher Abbott), her local handler; and Sadiq (Alfred Molina), a government official who wants to be more than a source. (Why the near uniformly Anglo casting?) The writer, Robert Carlock, and the directors, Glenn Ficarra and

John Requa, see Afghanistan through an American lens of gender inequality rooted in Afghan men's religious dogma and hypocrisy, while also looking benignly at the unifying charm of ethnic tradition. Distinguishing the American armed forces' good intentions from wise and well-conceived actions, the filmmakers keep to the surface of the bluntly rowdy story while conveying apolitical layers of regret and exasperation, in wanly comic and affectingly melodramatic action alike.—R.B. (*In wide release.*)

**The Witch**

A daunting début from Robert Eggers, who writes and directs this tale of demonic possession. The setting is New England, in the early seventeenth century; the clothes, the unyielding piety, and the turns of speech are suffused with a sense of the period. A lofty, God-fearing fellow named William (Ralph Ineson) takes his wife (Kate Dickie) and their five children to start a new life, cleansed of sin, in the wild. But sin seeks them out nonetheless, and something, or somebody, lurks in the forest beside which the family builds a home. The fable, its talons sharpened by a keening musical score from Mark Korven, is touched with a hint of the whodunit; we are never quite sure which of the characters has caved in to temptation. The witching that follows is rife with visible horrors, and Eggers carefully rations out the shocks and scares, but to what extent, even at the climax, are they the product of haunted minds? The movie finds its poise in the striking performance, both guileless and knowing, of Anya Taylor-Joy, as Thomasin, the couple's eldest child. She gets solid support from a goat.—Anthony Lane (*Reviewed in our issue of 2/29/16.*) (*In wide release.*)

## REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS

*Titles with a dagger are reviewed.*

**BAM Cinématek** "Migrating Forms." *March 5 at 9:30: "Translantics"* (2015, Britta Thie). • *March 6 at 2: "Homeland: Iraq Year Zero"* (2015, Abbas Fahdel). **Film Forum** In revival. *March 4-10 (call for showtimes): "Late Spring"* (1949, Yasujiro Ozu). **Metrograph** "Surrender to the Screen." *March 4 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "Taxi Driver"* (1976, Martin Scorsese). • *March 5 at noon and March 6 at 5:30: "The Long Day Closes."* (†) • *March 5 at 2 and March 7 at 1: "The Last Picture Show"* (1971, Peter Bogdanovich). • *March 5 at 3:15 and 7:45 and March 6 at 5: "Vivre Sa Vie"* (1962, Jean-Luc Godard). • *March 5 at 4:30 and March 6 at 10: "Femme Fatale"* (2002, Brian De Palma). • *March 6 at 3:30 and March 8 at 1: "Goodbye, Dragon Inn"* (2003, Tsai Ming-liang). • *March 6 at 7: "Variety"* (1983, Bette Gordon).

## THE FRONT ROW



*A video discussion of the 1942 musical "For Me and My Gal," starring Gene Kelly and Judy Garland as vaudevillians caught in the turmoil of war, in our digital edition.*

# DANCE

## Juliana F. May/Maydance

"Adult Documentary" is a kind of play in which five vivid dancers tell their own stories, possibly traumatic, possibly fictional. Forgoing her usual practice of keeping text and movement side by side yet separate, May here forces them to collide—contradicting or clarifying each other in the process. (*The Chocolate Factory*, 5-49 49th Ave., Long Island City. 866-811-4111. March 1-5 and March 8. Through March 12.)

## Akram Khan and Israel Galván / "Torobaka"

Flamenco and kathak, traditional dances from Spain and Northern India, respectively, have more in common than it might seem, thanks to the migration of the Romany people (or Gypsies) who spread their musical traditions from the Asian subcontinent across Europe. Khan and Galván are each masters of their medium—Khan specializes in kathak and Galván in flamenco—as well as avid experimenters. Here, they come together to test the limits of their shared heritage, and also, it seems, to size each other up. This duet, set in a bare space reminiscent of a boxing ring, is an exhibition of male dancing at its most exalted, a kind of danced duel performed in bare feet (Khan) and wood-soled flamenco shoes (Galván). Four musicians accompany them with *palmas* (clapping), tabla, and chanting. (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. March 2-5.)

## Alessandra Ferri and Herman Cornejo / "TRIO ConcertDance"

The Italian ballerina Alessandra Ferri, known for her passionate stage presence, began her comeback in 2013, after six years of retirement. Since then, she has often paired up with Herman Cornejo, a singularly musical and sultry principal dancer from American Ballet Theatre. In this evening of new *pas de deux*, the duo explore various moods, tailored for them by a variety of choreographers, including Demis Volpi, of Stuttgart Ballet, and the Australian-born Stanton Welch. The couple also perform a *pas de deux* from Angelin Preljocaj's 1994 work "Le Parc," and Ferri dances a solo made for her by the former Martha Graham dancer Fang-Yi Sheu. The other member of the titular trio is the pianist Bruce Livingston, who will provide live accompaniment. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. March 2-6.)

## Festival Ay! Más Flamenco

In celebration of its thirtieth anniversary, World Music Institute resurrects its annual flamenco festival, at Symphony Space (2537 Broadway, March 3-5) and La Nacional (239 W. 14th St., March 6), with a set of four programs that tilt toward the traditional. The outlier is La Otra Orilla, a troupe from Montreal that attempts with its show "Moi & les Autres" to transplant flamenco into an artier realm of dance-theatre. Otherwise, the festival's gaze is backward and Spanish, with the veteran dancer Joaquin Grilo paying tribute to the guitarist Paco de Lucia and, perhaps best of all, the spirited La Lupi reviving dances and manners of the past. To finish, the

husband-and-wife team of Sonia Olla and Ismael Fernández re-create the warm atmosphere of an Iberian flamenco cabaret at La Nacional, home to the Spanish Benevolent Society.

## Aakash Odedra Company

The U.K.-based dancer, trained in Indian classical dance (especially kathak), is a master of illusion. This evening is made up of solos created for him by four contemporary dancemakers. Only the opening number, "Nritta," by Odedra himself, makes explicit use of his Indian technique. Full of sparkling jumps and giddy turns, it may well be the most exciting piece in the show. The others, by Russell Maliphant, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, and Akram Khan (Odedra's mentor), are more stylized, using moody lighting and scroll-

ing, calligraphic moves to create shifting landscapes. (N.Y.U. Skirball Center, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-998-4941. March 4.)

## Peggy Spina Tap Company

For more than three decades, Spina, an eloquently light-footed tap dancer, has been giving friendly concerts in the SoHo loft where she lives. Her all-female company has existed a bit longer than that, and in honor of its thirty-fifth anniversary, she presents a program of a dozen short and sweet repertory pieces. As always, the pianist Joel Forrester accompanies with a trio of excellent jazz musicians. The revival of "She Do," a 1991 duet in 5/4 between Forrester and Spina, should be a highlight. (115 Prince St. 212-674-8885. March 4-5.)

# ABOVE & BEYOND



## Worldwide Play-In Weekend

The Associated Chamber Music Players prompt musicians around the world to host their own "play-in," big or small, in the comfort of their homes or in a shared public space; the sum of these scattered private gatherings will be an indefinite performance unstageable at any one venue. Rizzoli Bookstore, serving as a local hub, has invited several chamber-music ensembles to play in its salon. The event also launches an ongoing music series presented by Rizzoli in collaboration with the A.C.M.P. that will feature a monthly showcase of live music meant to brighten bookshelf perusals. (1133 Broadway. 212-759-2424. March 6.)

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

It's **Armory Week** in New York, so named after the giant international art fair—the Armory Show—that's held yearly in gallery spaces filling two West Side Piers (92 and 94). In addition to the usual modern, postwar, and contemporary fare, the current edition (March 3-6) includes a section meant to introduce collectors to the contemporary African art scene. (W. 55th St. at Twelfth Ave. 212-645-6440.) • Aimed at young collectors in town for the Armory Show, **Christie's** "First Open" sale offers a mix of higher-priced items by established modern and contemporary artists and more accessibly priced art by newer names. The house's March 4 auction is a good example; it encompasses a glowing orange composition by Albers and a crushed-metal sculpture by Chamberlain, in addition to works by Banksy ("Sid Vicious") and Ugo Rondinone. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) • In its "Contemporary Curated" series, **Sotheby's** adds the imprimatur of brand-name tastemakers to the above formula. The panel of curators of its upcoming sale (March 3) includes the basketball player and fashion maven Amar'e Stoudemire as well as Simon

Doonan, the "creative ambassador at large" for the snobby-chic New York department store Barneys. The lots here include a white circular wall sculpture by Anish Kapoor and a heavily impastoed canvas ("Untitled—Butterfly Face") by Mark Grotjahn. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### New School

*Asymptote*, the literary-translation journal, takes its name from a term in coordinate geometry that relates to the limit that a graphed equation may inch toward but never reach. It's an allusion to the fundamental limits of translation, a tension the journal embraces as it celebrates its fifth year of publishing literature from ninety-six countries and in seventy-two languages. The novelist **Frederic Tuten** moderates this reading and panel discussion, featuring **Ann Goldstein**, an editor at this magazine and the translator of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, and **Natasha Wimmer**, the translator of seven books by the vagabond Chilean author Roberto Bolaño. (Alvin Johnson/J. M. Kaplan Hall. 66 W. 12th St. 212-229-5667. March 3.)

### Fales Library

The most appealing food on the market today is defined by what it is not: free of gluten and cages and corn and conflict. In "Food Studies 20 Years In: Is the Food Movement Really Changing Food?" the restaurant consultant **Clark Wolf** asks panelists whether decades of research have actually improved the food Americans consume. Guest speakers include **Krishnendu Ray**, the professor and chair of N.Y.U.'s Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health, and **Jasmine Nielson**, head of the community-based organization Just Food. (70 Washington Sq. S. 212-998-2596. March 8 at 5.)

# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Murray's Cheese Bar

264 Bleecker St. (646-476-8882)

IF YOU ARE the kind of person who, upon hearing that there exists something called "buffalo cheese curds," can think of nothing else until you eat them, then Murray's Cheese Bar is for you. This narrow restaurant, cozy-modern with low light and reclaimed wood, opened in 2012, as a kind of annex to the famous Murray's Cheese Shop, two doors down in the heart of the West Village. The store, established in 1940, was bought by a local businessman in the early nineties and, in 2011, moved across the street from its original tiny corner location into a vast cheese-selling paradise. The new shop was snazzy, for sure, but it managed to keep the original's cheese-geek optimism alive, offering tastes of obscure delights and inspiring party platters anew, while bulking up with hundreds of fancy, Murray's-approved pantry products and in-store creations such as house-made pastas and charred broccoli salad. The restaurant was a natural extension of the business—but could it actually be fun? Would too much cheese end up killing the party?

It turns out that there is no such thing as too much cheese. While ordering at the Cheese Bar might require some serious self-restraint, it's possible to keep it simple. A fine meal can be made of fondue (the classic Gruyère with kirsch, accom-

panied by bread, gherkins, pickled cipollini, and garlicky pepperoni) and sliders (juicy grass-fed patties on slightly sweet brioche buns). For the pro-*affinage* connoisseur, the servers are equipped to offer a friendly discourse, say, on the "chef's choice" cheeses topping the burgers, such as Cornelia, "a really good melting cheese, like a funky Monterey Jack, with a washed rind from upstate." The vegetables, for the most part, have been bombed, for good measure, with salt or some kind of acid or cheese, or all three: charred radishes (with kimchi labneh), kale sprouts (with Sardinian Poddà Classico), shishito peppers (with fennel pollen). Pulled-pork-pimento macaroni and cheese, however, goes several steps too far.

Happy hour is popular, even though there aren't really deals (the beers are a bit cheaper, but otherwise prices are the same). That's the time to order those buffalo cheese curds, fried Wisconsin-cheddar morsels doused in a tangy butter-and-hot-sauce concoction. Once in a while, the service might walk a fine line between helpful and not so much, as when a Gorgonzola dolce was described as a "gateway blue." Does anyone here really need help appreciating blue cheese? Not the kid who followed that up with cheese ice cream. The flavor? Stilton, drizzled with butterscotch. Forgive and forget, and then order the cheese plate, too. (*Dishes \$8-\$26.*)

—Shauna Lyon

## BAR TAB



### Maiden Lane

162 Avenue B (646-755-8911)

Nialls Fallon, a proprietor of Maiden Lane—America's only tinned-seafood bar—grew up eating canned tuna and oysters, which he would heap with cream cheese on saltines. Working late nights as a general manager at Torrisi Italian Specialties, Fallon found himself repurposing the childhood snack as the perfect post-work bite: nutritious, inexpensive, exceptionally storage-friendly. "It makes sense that it's sailor food," Nialls said, explaining that the establishment's name is a nod to the congregational hub of sailors in port cities around the world. On a recent wintry Friday, the concrete wraparound bar filled up with a leather-jacketed thirty-something set while a d.j. spun Teddy Pendergrass next to a parked pram. The baby, a three-month-old who did not object to old-school R. & B., gazed contentedly at the pine-planked ceiling while her mother, with bangs and horn-rim glasses, nursed a glass of white wine. "I threw my baby shower here!" she told her companion. Like the pleasingly spare space, the drinks menu is minimalist but homey, with agreeable riffs on the Italian apéritif (the Spritz, with grapefruit and sparkling wine) and the Negroni (the Blood and Sand, with Scotch rather than gin). Two young women rosy from the cold ordered hot cider spiked with applejack, ladled out from a gargantuan soup kettle. The cod liver—one of some fifty varieties of canned seafood, which also include cockles, paprika-oil-packed octopus, and brined razor clams—is a deserving best-seller, unless, of course, you are sharing it with a promising date. "This is good with everything," one woman told another, her mouth full of bread and cod—"except, perhaps, kissing."—Jiayang Fan

# COLORS OF GUDRUN

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT

#### A TRUCE IN SYRIA

LAST TUESDAY, AMAQ, a news agency associated with the Islamic State, reported that ISIS fighters had captured the village of Khanaser from the Syrian government. Khanaser sits on the main supply route to the government-controlled part of Aleppo, Syria's largest city, and it has been crucial in the recent campaign—backed by Russia, Hezbollah, and Iran—to crush the opposition rebels who hold the eastern part of the city. The battle for Aleppo, which began in 2012, has left tens of thousands of people dead and large parts of the city depopulated. On Thursday, it was reported that government forces had taken Khanaser back.

Under the "cessation of hostilities" announced last week by the United States and Russia, the battle for Khanaser will be allowed to go on, as will many other battles. The agreement, negotiated by Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, stipulates that the government of President Bashar al-Assad and an array of rebel groups opposing it, which includes those backed by the United States and its allies, will stop fighting each other. But it does not cover operations involving either of the two strongest rebel groups, the Islamic State and the Al Qaeda franchise Jabhat al-Nusra.

Following a phone call with the White House last Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the deal could "radically" transform the situation in Syria, by laying the groundwork for negotiations. President Obama was less fulsome, but said that he hoped the truce could lead to a resumption of peace talks between the Syrian government and the rebel groups, and would help to bring the focus back to defeating ISIS. (The United Nations announced a new round of talks on Friday.) Aid groups said they hoped that the pause

in the fighting might allow them to distribute more food and medicine within the country, where four hundred thousand people are living in areas under siege, and are threatened with starvation. (When aid workers were able to enter one of those areas recently—the Damascus suburb of Moadamiyah—they found some residents reduced to eating grass.) Five million more people are being fed regularly by the United Nations' World Food Programme, which ferries food into Syria.

In circumstances as dire as those in Syria—as many as half a million dead, half the prewar population driven from their homes—any agreement, however limited, that offers relief to the suffering ought to be celebrated. Still, it's difficult to view the partial truce as much more than a ratification of the status quo that began when Putin ordered the Russian military intervention, last September. At the time, the war was at a stalemate, but there were signs that Assad's regime, even with substantial help from Iran and Hezbollah, was teetering. Among other things, the regime, dependent on the country's Alawite minority, no longer had enough soldiers to hold all its territory.

The Russian military effort, by directing its fire mostly at rebel groups backed by the United States, has enabled the Assad government to tighten its grasp on the strip of cities that stretches from Damascus to Aleppo and Latakia, the site of Russia's base in Syria. The air campaign against ISIS and al-Nusra was left largely to the U.S., whose other allies have generally stood on the sidelines. Relief officials say that the Russian-backed offensives have created at least a hundred thousand new Syrian refugees and an untold number of displaced persons inside the country. Many of the refugees have headed for Europe, a migration that has amounted to something like revenge for the economic sanctions placed on Russia after its military intervention in Ukraine. The



only curious aspect of Putin's agreeing to the cessation of hostilities was the timing; before the temporary setback in Khanaser, the campaign by government forces to retake the rest of Aleppo appeared to be headed toward victory.

Other aspects of the truce are problematic: the leaders of Turkey, a member of NATO, have declared that they will not honor the truce with respect to Kurdish forces in Syria, which they see as a branch of the Kurdish insurgency in their country. Until now, the Kurds in Syria have been the U.S.'s most effective ally in the fight against ISIS. Also, according to relief officials, many of the Syrians in need of food are in areas blockaded by the Army. Under the agreement, aid convoys are to be granted full access, but there is no assurance that they will be allowed to pass.

Most important, it's not clear that a "cessation of hostilities" is enforceable—or that the Assad regime and its allies have any intention of abiding by its terms. Since the beginning of the uprising, Assad has referred to all those who oppose him as "terrorists," and has treated them all, even children, with the same murderous intensity. There is no indication that he will start making distinctions between ISIS and al-Nusra and the groups that are party to the agreement. It's more likely that he and his allies will carry on with their military operations in much the same

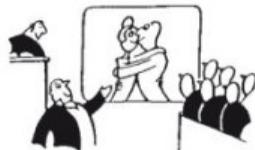
way as before. Western intelligence agencies' knowledge of which rebel groups occupy which neighborhoods is insubstantial, in part because the groups often come together and then break apart. In such circumstances, it's difficult to imagine Assad and his allies holding their fire—and it's difficult to imagine anyone in the West stopping them if they don't.

With the exception of the air campaign against the Islamic State, the Obama Administration has refused to apply greater military pressure, in the form of either a no-fly zone to protect civilians or anything more than token assistance to the more moderate anti-Assad rebels. The reasons that President Obama has cited for this refusal are not unpersuasive, particularly the point that few of the groups are credible enough to mount a serious threat to Assad. But, in the absence of American power, the battlefield in Syria has been reshaped by others. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Obama's top security officials have already concluded that the Russians will not adhere to the agreement, and are searching for a Plan B. Assad and his confederates remain in power. A fresh round of negotiations and even a partial ceasefire are unlikely to change that, or the misery in places like Khanaser.

—Dexter Filkins

## THE PICTURES

### BLACK CARPET



FOUR DAYS BEFORE the Academy Awards, Russell Simmons's new-media company, All Def Digital, hosted its own movie-awards show, a D.I.Y. response to the #OscarsSoWhite campaign. "We were watching the controversy around the Oscars unfold, and it occurred to us that every Wednesday night, yards away from where the Oscars are held, we run a standup-comedy night," Sanjay Sharma, All Def Digital's president, said last week. Tony Rock, a younger brother of Chris Rock (this year's Oscar host), emcees. The first thought was to do an Oscars-themed night, but "that quickly snowballed and took on a life of its own."

Sharma and his team put together the awards show in ten days, after making a quick deal with the Fusion network to air it opposite the Academy Awards. All Def's standup show is usually held at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, on Hollywood Boulevard, but Academy Awards-related street closures forced them to relocate to a Hollywood night club called Lure. At

7 P.M. on Wednesday, camera crews set up along a stretch of carpet—black, at Simmons's request, rather than red.

As guests arrived, Simmons, in shirt-sleeves and a purple bow tie, maneuvered around tables and plastic chairs. Well-wishers thumped him on the back. He explained that he wasn't against the Oscars. "I just think they needed what Jada said"—on Twitter, Jada Pinkett Smith had lamented the absence of black nominees in top categories. "Sometimes a little pressure makes diamonds. I love Hollywood, I love what we're doing in Hollywood, and I want it to be better."

At nine o'clock, the comedian Gary (G-Thang) Johnson arrived onstage and implored attendees to take their seats. "If your outfit shouldn't be on TV, sit in the back," he bellowed. Drake's "Back to Back" boomed from the speakers, and Snoop Dogg hopped onstage to dance. Nick Cannon, in a suit of what looked like gray snakeskin, slapped hands with the model Amber Rose. "It's all family," Cannon said, smiling. "It's like a family reunion."

Tony Rock presided over the ceremony in a black suit and Adidas. A big-screen TV served as a teleprompter. Regina Hall, presenting the first award, for Best Actress, said, "I didn't write this, so I don't know if I'm gonna be able to make it land." (The scripted joke suggested

that America's first female President should model herself on Suge Knight, the rap mogul who is currently in jail.)

There were thirteen categories, and the nominees spanned decades of movie-making. Contenders for Best Helpful White Person included Michelle Pfeiffer, in "Dangerous Minds," and Christoph Waltz, in "Django Unchained." Waltz won. Robin Thicke accepted the award, a golden statue of a pimp, "on behalf of all white people." Five Reparation Awards were given, for being "just black enough to still be castable," to Vin Diesel, Luis Guzman, Jackie Chan, Angela Bassett, and Dwayne Johnson. When a highlight reel of menacing film villains (category: Best Bad Muh Fucka) cut out, Terry Crews, who was presenting the award, threw up his hands: "Man, this is ghetto as hell." "I'm falling asleep," the publicist Peggy Siegal, sitting with some reporters at Table Ten, said.

During breaks for to-be-inserted commercials, guests flocked to the bar. "We're having a good time," J. B. Smoove, who had on aviator sunglasses and stayed seated with his wife, said. "Everybody's here. We're here, networking, connecting. You know, you've got to start somewhere. We're going to be in a better place in a year or two." He went on, "You've got to spark something to end something, that's my

motto." He made his hands into fists and then opened them wide. "Who!"

Staffers at All Def Digital had contrived the awards' categories, nominees, and winners, with the exception of the Best Picture and Most Quoted Movie categories, whose winners were decided by online voters. The former was the only category whose entrants ("Beasts of No Nation," "Chi-Raq," "Concussion," "Creed," "Dope," and "Straight Outta Compton") were all in theatres last year. "Straight Outta Compton" won, and Ice Cube, one of the film's producers, accepted the award, then made a beeline for a waiting car.

When the show was over, Simmons seemed happy. "I think it went very well," he said. "Imagine, we need to cut it to forty minutes. We have eight hours of footage."

At the after party, Tony Rock propped his three-year-old niece on a banquette to dance. "I wanted her to see this so that, when she's older and she hears about how Hollywood used to be selective in hiring, she'll be, like, 'Really?'"

Snoop Dogg held court in a V.I.P. section. "This awards show was so relaxing, so fun. It's what an awards show is supposed to be," he said. "A lot of times, you see people be so stiff, they don't really get a chance to enjoy themselves because of so many rules and regulations." He sat in a booth, wearing a cardigan sweater and puffing on a blunt. "I've never been to the Oscars, but I feel like they need new blood in there. They need people that are hip."

—Sheila Marikar

## SING-ALONGS LADY TELEVISION



THE ACTRESS ALISON PILL sat at the bar at Karaoke Boho on a slow Monday night in the West Village, paging through binders of songs. "I'm looking for something new-country that fits my voice," she said. There was no rush: the only other customer had used the restroom, then left. She went on, "I moved here from Toronto at eighteen to act better and more, but I looked like I was twelve, so I smoked to seem sophisticated—and

it lowered my voice to a mezzo." Did it also make her more sophisticated? "Yeah!" How could she tell? "When I started dating men in their thirties."

Pill, now thirty herself, and married to a man who's forty, had come from the set of her new ABC drama, "The Family," which debuts this week. Her character, Willa—the campaign manager for her mother, a Maine mayor who's running for governor—is a tidy Goody Two-Shoes. However, she said, perfectionists are always ablaze underneath: "Willa is going to be hated by a lot of people!" Excitable and owl-like-looking behind giant horn-rims, Pill gradually revealed herself as a Canadian-nationalist grammarian, saying "zed" for "z" and insisting that words like "savour" retain their "u." "U' is not used very often, so it's a nice way to slip it in there," she said. "I also love me an Oxford comma, if you really want to get into it."

She took a preparatory swig of sake as her song, the Band Perry's "Better Dig Two," loaded onscreen. Then she belted out the cautionary lyrics—"So if the ties that bind ever do come loose / Tie 'em in a knot like a hangman's noose"—as brassy as Carrie Underwood doing "Before He Cheats." Her performance elicited a rustle of "Whoa, now!" applause from the two other patrons who'd filtered in for a drink and a song.

"Done wrong, karaoke is an off-key bachelorette party being incredibly irritating," Pill said, as a man began to croon Heatwave's "Always and Forever." "But I see it as one of the last vestiges of communal storytelling. Also, after a crappy day some nerds just want to express themselves by singing. It's like musical theatre, where your feelings take the shape of an unexpected naked moment." When the man concluded his cover, the other vocalist said, "That was beautiful, man. If my parents were here, they'd get remarried."

Pill sings karaoke at least once a month, inclining toward Shania Twain, Alanis Morissette, "and other angry Canadians." She laughed. "Anger fascinates me, and I have a lot of it. Anger and guilt. I'm a white, privileged Canadian with an acting career—what an asshole! That's the guilt. And I'm angry about the 'Be pretty and pleasing' thing women have to do." She toyed with her hair, purred, "Oh, what?" then plopped her chin on her palm and chirped, "I'm so dumb!" Pill's charac-

ter on the bygone HBO drama "The Newsroom," a producer named Maggie, had to take a lot of disarming pratfalls to compensate for her smarts. Nonetheless, Pill noted, "Internet meanness doesn't get any easier when you dress up."

She broke off to watch Eminem's video of "Phenomenal," and when John Malkovich appeared in it, rolling up in a bicycle rickshaw to slurp lo mein, she cried, "He's going to offer you some Malkovich noodles—eat them, Eminem!" But Eminem was too busy rapping. She went on, "I've also got my business voice: 'Hi, it's Alison Pill calling. I just wanted to talk briefly about the part.'" Her tone was brisk, low, almost



Alison Pill

scornful. "It's a real Bacall, ballbuster voice—but it and the twirly-hair bimbo are both put-ons, not really me."

On "The Family," Pill has been putting on Joan Allen, who plays her mother. "I've been doing bits of the way Joan folds her legs"—she crossed her ankles demurely—"and the mouth thing she does, where she furrows it to show tension." (She pursed her lips hard, incarnating Allen's angry daughter.) "It's so great! Our lead is a woman, our showrunner is a woman who wrote for 'Scandal,' and a lot of our writers are female. So we're fully in lady television—which means women being incredible at their jobs, complicated in their loves, and sometimes crying a lot."

She handed the bartender her last request slip: "As If We Never Said Goodbye," Norma Desmond's torch song from the musical "Sunset Boulevard." Then, swaying earnestly, she sang it in a bright, sweet, plaintive voice to the now empty

room. "And that's me, too," she said, resting the mike on the bar. "I am a crazy actress, and, it being Hollywood, I'll be Norma Desmond—caftans, turbans—before long. In five years, I'll be playing Miley Cyrus's mother."

—Tad Friend

## PERSEVERANCE DEPT.

### MARINA'S WILL



MARINA LITVINENKO'S HUSBAND, Alexander (Sasha) Litvinenko, was poisoned to death with a radioactive substance called polonium 210 in London in November of 2006. After his murder, as she told an audience at the Brooklyn Public Library recently, "I wanted to know who killed my husband." She was speaking to the crowd via Skype, so the view of her on the screen at the front of the auditorium was from desk level. It showed a slim, red-haired woman in a brown jacket with a Nehru collar in front of a bookshelf in an apartment. At first, her eyelids kept almost closing; it was 7:45 P.M. in Brooklyn, 12:45 A.M. in London.

Mrs. Litvinenko had just accomplished something that no one in power had encouraged her to do. Her husband, a former agent of the K.G.B. (its successor agency is the F.S.B.), had been a loud critic of that organization and of President Vladimir Putin. In the U.K., where the Litvinenkos received asylum for themselves and their son, in 2001,

Litvinenko was looking into connections between Putin and international organized crime. At a meeting with a veteran of the Russian security services named Andrei Lugovoy, who he thought was a friend, he drank some tea. Twenty-three days later, after a dreadful sequence of symptoms, his heart gave out and he died.

"This has not been an easy period for our family," Mrs. Litvinenko said. "At the time Sasha was killed, our son, Anatoly, was twelve. We had started a new life. In 2000, Sasha had saved us by getting us out of Russia; but unfortunately we couldn't save him. By making the world to see exactly what happened to him, I did what I could do for him."

The murder investigation by the London police involved scores of officers and experts. Because of the poison's radioactive residues, almost every move of Lugovoy and his sidekick, a man named Dmitri Kovtun, could be traced. The police charged Lugovoy and Kovtun with murder, the British government asked Russia to extradite them, and the Russians refused. A coroner's inquest into the death was suspended pending police investigation. There matters stood for nearly five years. Meanwhile, Mrs. Litvinenko and her lawyers kept asking that the inquest be reopened. The sight of Putin visiting Prime Minister David Cameron during the London Summer Olympics in 2012 spurred her on even more. In 2013, Britain's Home Secretary rejected a petition for a public inquiry into Litvinenko's death, and said that relations with Russia had been a factor in the decision.

Eventually, Mrs. Litvinenko filed a

court challenge to force the government to open an inquiry, which is of wider range than an inquest, and can take into account classified documents, though without revealing their contents. Bringing the challenge was a risky step, because had Mrs. Litvinenko lost she would have been liable for the government's court costs as well as her own. But she won, and the Home Secretary appointed Sir Robert Owen, a former High Court judge, to lead the inquiry. It collected evidence and heard from witnesses for more than a year, and in January it published its findings. They were: that Lugovoy and Kovtun murdered Litvinenko; that the Russian state very likely sponsored the killing; and that the head of the F.S.B. at the time and President Putin probably authorized it. Lugovoy and Kovtun have denied any involvement in the murder, as have Kremlin officials.

"The only reason there was an inquiry was Marina's will," Alexander Goldfarb, the Russian dissident and author, who shared the stage that evening, said. "Sasha was my friend, I am head of the Litvinenko Justice Foundation, but at one point even I was telling her maybe it is time to give up."

Members of the audience asked her if she had support in Russia (yes), if she planned to return there (not soon), and if she expected any reparations, or for the killers to be punished ("No. Russia can't be changed"). A woman with dark-rimmed eyes and long dark hair who said she had once met Mrs. Litvinenko near Litvinenko's grave, in Highgate Cemetery, told her she was an inspiration.

"My son was indicator for everything I did," Mrs. Litvinenko said. "He was always worried about me, trying to show he is fine, not depressed. He never talked about his father, but he sat next to me every day during the hearings. I wanted him to understand who his father was. My son is now twenty-two and about to graduate from university. Somebody interviewed him, and he just exploded with all he had learned and all he had been thinking about his father. He said to me, 'Mummie, now I have my father back to me.' Today, the world knows that what Sasha was saying about Putin's crimes is true. I never thought we could do this. I never thought I could have this influence on people."

—Ian Frazier

## COLD COMFORT BOOKS



**I**N ANTONIN SCALIA's thirty years on the Supreme Court, his name became a byword for social conservatism. And when Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that the Senate would refuse to consider any replacement President Obama nominates it was natural that opponents of same-sex marriage and abortion were relieved. Yet Scalia's death will have only a limited impact on the culture wars, because regarding many social issues he was already in the minority on the Court. But there is one area where the question of his replacement has huge consequences: business. As a member of the Court's conservative majority, Scalia played a key role in moving American law in a more corporate-friendly direction. Now that majority is gone, and a huge amount rides on what happens next.

Under Chief Justice John Roberts, the Court has not gone as far in limiting government power over the marketplace as many conservatives would have liked. But the Roberts Court has been the most pro-business of any since the Second World War, according to a paper by the law professors Lee Epstein and William Landes and Judge Richard Posner that looked at decisions from 1946 to 2011. Its five sitting conservatives, including Scalia, ranked among the ten most business-friendly Justices of that period. The Roberts Court hasn't just made a lot of pro-business rulings. It has taken a higher percentage of cases brought by businesses than previous courts, and it has handed down far-reaching decisions that have remade corporate regulation and law. In *Citizens United*, it famously ruled that corporations had free-speech rights and that many restrictions on corporate spending in elections were therefore unconstitutional. It has overturned long-standing antitrust restrictions. It has limited liability for corporate fraud and made it harder for workers to successfully sue for age and gender discrimination. It has made suing businesses and governments more difficult, especially in class-action suits.

This is no accident. Since the Reagan Administration, Republican Presidents have filled the Court with Justices steeped in the ideology of the conservative legal movement. As Brian Fitzpatrick, a law professor at Vanderbilt who once clerked for Scalia, told me, "Conservative Justices start from a world view that says we have too much litigation in general and it's a sap on the economy." Conservative nominees to the Court have been far more worried about government overreach than about corporate misbehavior. They have been skeptical of the use of class-action suits to achieve social goals or enforce regulations. And, once corporations recognized that the Court was

predisposed to favor their interests, they began pursuing those interests more aggressively. As the legendary N.Y.U. law professor Arthur R. Miller told me, "The business community smelled blood and went after it." Most notably, the Chamber of Commerce has become assiduous in pushing corporate cases to the Court.

A few of these cases have received a lot of attention, but the most consequential work of the Roberts Court in protecting corporate rights has been in cases that have gone mostly unnoticed, including a pair (*A.T.&T. v. Concepcion* and *American Express v. Italian Colors*) in which Scalia wrote the majority opinion. In these cases, both of which turned on an interpretation of a once obscure 1925 law, the Court ruled that companies could require customers to give up their right to sue in open court, with disputes to be settled by a private arbitrator instead. "These cases don't get people's attention the way things like abortion and same-sex marriage do," Miller said. But, if the decisions stand, Fitzpatrick argues, "they have the potential to literally wipe out the class-action lawsuit."

That might not sound like a bad thing—we're always hearing that Americans are too litigious—but, in an era when regulators are routinely falling down on the job, lawsuits play a crucial role in deterring corporate misbehavior. Miller calls them a "private enforcement of public policies." And when it comes to big corporations class-action suits are often the only kind that make any economic sense. If every individual defrauded by a company loses fifty dollars, the collective harm can be immense, but it's not worthwhile for any single victim or lawyer to bother. Fitzpatrick says that obstacles to filing class-action lawsuits make it more likely that "companies will

not be held accountable for hurting people, for cheating people, for defrauding people, for discriminating against people." In that sense, the battle over access to the courtroom is, as Miller puts it, "a kind of class conflict between ordinary individuals and corporate power." And in that conflict there's no question which side Scalia was on.

Of course, there's no guarantee that his death will change things. But many of the Roberts Court's most important business cases were decided by a 5-4 margin, with the five conservative Justices voting as a bloc. And, as Fitzpatrick points out, "Scalia has done more than any other justice in making it difficult for consumers and employees to bring class-action suits. So his absence alone may make a difference." There have already been signs of this: just last week, Dow Chemical settled a major class-action suit, saying that Scalia's death increased the chances of "unfavorable outcomes for business." It's unlikely that Scalia will be replaced anytime soon. But let's hope that, when a successor is finally appointed, it is someone willing to give ordinary citizens the day in court that Scalia worked so hard to deny them.

—James Surowiecki



## DIRTY HANDS

*A cheating scandal in the world of professional bridge.*

BY DAVID OWEN



**I**N 2010, Lotan Fisher and Ron Schwartz—Israeli bridge players in their early twenties—were members of the team that won the World Junior Teams Championship. The following year, their team won the European Youth Bridge Team Championships and they were invited to compete in a number of tournaments that included most of the world's top players. During the next few years, they finished at or near the top in a remarkable number of those tournaments.

Bridge is a card game for four people. Like doubles tennis, it's played two on two—although at a bridge table the partners sit opposite each other. (The seats are designated by compass points: North-South versus

East-West.) There are many millions of players worldwide, and major tournaments attract thousands of entrants, but the arrival of new talent is a cause for celebration, because older players often worry that the game is aging into extinction. Successful young players stand out for another reason, too: bridge, unlike chess, has never been dominated by prodigies. “The game is hugely experience-based,” Gavin Wolpert, a top professional and a co-founder of an influential Web site, Bridgewinners.com, told me recently. He’s thirty-three years old—an age that, in the bridge world, counts as something like late adolescence. “The longer you play, the better you get at making good decisions, because you’ve

seen it before. When you’re young, you don’t walk in and suddenly start winning every event.”

Yet Fisher and Schwartz were more than holding their own against some of the best partnerships in the world. They often made the kinds of plays that are fun to read about later, in bridge publications, because the intuition and reasoning can seem almost Sherlockian. The best players are able to deduce the presence of particular cards in opponents’ hands long before those cards have been exposed in play, based on what’s happened so far, and they think like oddsmakers. One of the longest chapters in the American Contract Bridge League’s “Encyclopedia of Bridge” lists precise probabilities for alternative approaches to playing hundreds of specific combinations of cards. No one would try to memorize all the percentages, but every skilled player acquires an increasingly comprehensive sense of what’s likely to work and what isn’t.

Last summer, at an international event in Chicago, Boye Brogeland, a Norwegian player, became convinced that Fisher and Schwartz had made prescient bids and plays that they couldn’t have found with skillful sleuthing alone. “Bridge is such a logical game,” he told me. “When you do a lot of strange things in a very short period of time, and those strange things are successful—it just doesn’t happen.” He spent hours studying records of hands that he and his partner had played against Fisher and Schwartz, and concluded that they had been cheating. “I just didn’t know how they were doing it,” he said. (Fisher and Schwartz have denied all the allegations.)

Brogeland is in his early forties. He has blond hair, much of which often seems to be sticking straight up, and a more athletic build than most of the world’s best bridge players. (At major tournaments, the relatively few players who look as though they’ve spent much time outside tend to be the smokers.) Brogeland had been a teammate of Fisher and Schwartz during the two previous tournament cycles, on a six-player team sponsored by a retired American businessman. (Tournament teams typically consist of three pairs.) On several occasions during that period,

he told me, he had questioned them about their results on certain hands, which he felt they had played with uncanny precision. “I asked them, ‘What was your logic on this hand?’” he recalled later. “They always had a quick answer, but their responses still kept me on my toes.” Now that he had competed against them, he was convinced that they were secretly exchanging information about their cards. He shared his suspicions with several other players. “Boye was steaming,” Wolpert said. “But I told him to do this the right way. Don’t go around saying they’re cheating—you need to get the evidence.”

All the major bridge organizations have protocols for dealing with allegations of unethical behavior, but the organizations have often been ineffective in the past, and Brogeland feared they’d do nothing. Instead, he posted a comment in a thread on Bridgewinners.com in which he said that he and three of his teammates from the previous two years had decided to give up everything they had won together—something that he said all players should do if they believe their team includes “a cheating pair.” This wasn’t a veiled accusation, since Fisher and Schwartz were the only teammates he didn’t name. Jeff Meckstroth—an American bridge superstar for almost four decades—told me, “Boye had balls as big as church bells to be doing what he was doing.” And Brogeland wasn’t finished. Within a few weeks, what began as a single accusation had grown into a major scandal, involving the highest levels of international play.

**B**RIDGE EVOLVED FROM whist, a similar but simpler game, which dates to at least the early seventeen-hundreds. In both, a card is played from each of the four hands in succession, and the resulting four-card “trick” is won either by the highest card in the suit that was led or by the highest card in the “trump” suit—a designated supersuit, which defeats all others. This sounds straightforward until you try it. One of the reasons bridge continues to fascinate players all over the world is that, in order to become even sort of good at it, you have to be willing to be bad at it for a long time.

In whist, the trump suit is determined by exposing the last card in the deck; in bridge, the trump suit is decided by an auction, which the four players conduct before revealing any of their cards. The auction also establishes how many tricks the auction’s winner will have to take in order to earn a positive score—a target known as the contract. (Some auctions result in a “no-trump” contract, meaning that the hand will be played without a supersuit.) The game’s modern version, called contract bridge, is usually attributed to Harold S. Vanderbilt, who, during an ocean cruise in 1925, devised several transformative improvements to the scoring system of the previous version, auction bridge. His ideas caught on with extraordinary speed, and within a few years auction bridge had all but disappeared.

In tournaments and at bridge clubs, identical hands are played at all tables, and each pair’s or team’s score is based on how well it does relative to others playing the same cards—a form of the game known as duplicate, one of whose purposes is to reduce the role of luck. At each table, the player whose bid initiates the final contract is called the declarer. His opponents are called the defenders, and the play begins when the defender sitting to the left of the declarer turns one of his cards face up on the table—a potentially momentous play, called the opening lead. The declarer’s partner now lays all his own cards on the table, also face up (and, optionally, excuses himself to go outside for a cigarette); his hand, called the dummy, is played not by him but by the declarer, in addition to his own.

There are many legitimate ways in which players exchange information about their hands, during both bidding and play. Some bidding sequences, known as bidding conventions, have artificial meanings. One of the most widely used is Blackwood (named for the man who invented it), in which a bid of “four no-trump” asks the bidder’s partner to reveal how many aces he holds: a response of “five clubs” means no aces (or all four), “five diamonds” means one ace, “five hearts” means two aces, “five spades” means three. Over the decades, Blackwood has spawned many variations, some of

them quite complicated. My regular bridge partners and I occasionally allow beginning players to use a simple version, which we call Friedman Blackwood, after our late friend John Friedman, who was always forgetting the responses. (You answer by holding up fingers.)

For the defenders, the play of the hand is governed by conventions known as carding agreements. The oldest, which dates to the early days of whist, is to lead the fourth-highest card when playing from a long suit. If you know that that’s what your partner’s doing, you can apply the so-called Rule of Eleven: subtract the rank of the led card from eleven, and the result is the number of higher cards in that suit which are contained in the other three hands. Since you can see two of those hands (your own and the dummy), you now know the exact distribution of all the higher cards. One reason this isn’t cheating is that the declarer can read and exploit the signal, too, since he can also see two of the four hands. In bridge, all agreements must be transparent; secret understandings between partners are not allowed. Tournament players reveal their agreements on a printed form, which their opponents can examine, and if an opponent is confused by something, during either the bidding or the play, he can ask for an explanation at his next turn.

Expert poker players often take advantage of a skill they call table feel: an ability to read the facial expressions and other unconscious “tells” exhibited by their opponents. Bridge players rely on table feel, too, but in bridge not all tells can be exploited legally by all players. If one of my opponents hesitates during the bidding or the play, I’m allowed to draw conclusions from the hesitation—but if my partner hesitates I’m not. What’s more, if I seem to have taken advantage of information that I wasn’t authorized to know, my opponents can summon the tournament director and seek an adjusted result for the hand we just played. Principled players do their best to ignore their partner and play at a consistent tempo, in order to avoid exchanging unauthorized information—and, if they do end up noticing

something they shouldn't have noticed, they go out of their way not to exploit it. Unprincipled players consciously take advantage of such information. And, occasionally, they go a great deal further than that.

**I**F YOU ATTEND the spring North American Bridge Championships, which will be held in Reno in March, you won't hear any mention of prize money, because there is none. The world's best players earn hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, but the money is in salaries and other fees paid by wealthy team sponsors and "clients," whose only goal is glory. Steve Weinstein, who is fifty-two and has been one of the highest-ranked players in the world for more than a decade, told me that, because rich bridge addicts outnumber great players, competition for the services of the top pros can be intense. Weinstein worked as an options trader on Wall Street before switching, after 9/11, to bridge and poker full time. The team that he plays for is financed by Frank T. (Nick) Nickell, the chairman of Kelso & Company, a private-equity firm in Manhattan. (Nickell himself plays on his team, and was inducted into the American Contract Bridge League's Hall of Fame in 2008.)

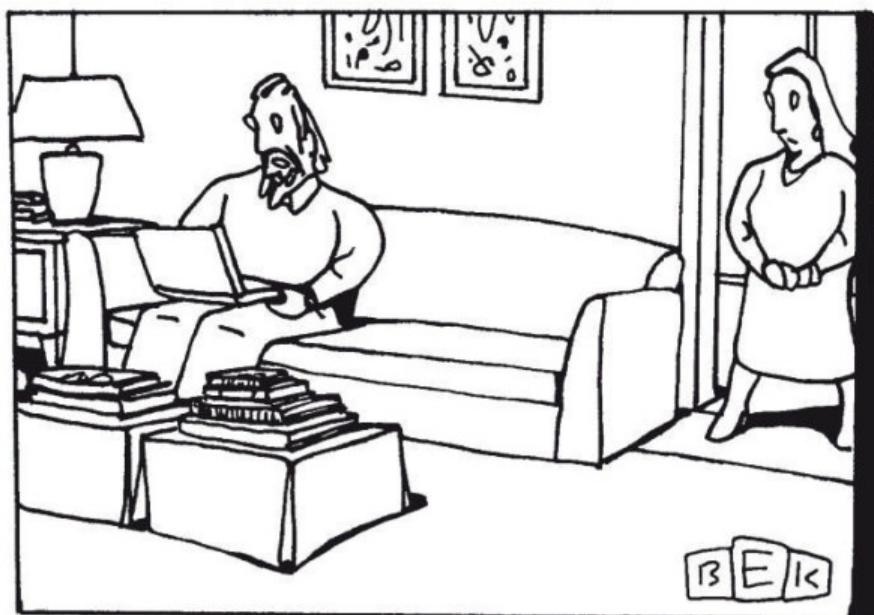
The first American full-time pro-

fessional bridge team, called the Dallas Aces, was formed in 1968 by Ira G. Corn, Jr., a Texas businessman. The pay wasn't spectacular: a thousand dollars a month for married players, somewhat less for bachelors, plus travel and tournament expenses. Corn assembled his team because he was upset that, for more than a decade, the game had been dominated by a group of Italian players known as the Blue Team. The Dallas Aces won the World Teams Championship in 1970, and again the following year. Those victories were all the more impressive because the Aces were convinced that the Blue Team was cheating, although no members of the team were ever formally charged. Bob Hamman, who played on the Aces and now, in his late seventies, is universally considered to have been one of the best bridge players ever, told me, "The Blue Team had two outstanding players and one very good player, but the other three were essentially from central casting." He conjectured that the Italians used a number of illicit signals, involving things like hand gestures and the positioning of their cigarettes. In 1975, two members of a later version of the Blue Team were caught signalling under the table with their feet; they've been known ever since as the Italian Foot Soldiers.

An American player told me that

the Blue Team's cheating might be considered an inevitable consequence of Italy's unusual card-playing culture. In briscola, a popular trick-taking game, one of the objects is to surreptitiously pass information to your partner, without being observed by an opponent. (In one signalling system, tightening the lips over the teeth shows an ace, glancing upward shows a king, and shrugging one shoulder shows a jack.) But, over the years, plenty of non-Italians have been caught cheating, too. One notorious incident took place in Buenos Aires in 1965, at a major international tournament called the Bermuda Bowl, and involved Terence Reese, who is still widely regarded as perhaps the best English player in the history of the game. Dorothy Hayden—a great player herself, who was later married to Alan Truscott, the *Times*' bridge columnist for forty-one years—determined, by watching them play, that Reese and his partner were showing each other how many hearts they held by positioning their fingers in particular ways when they fanned their cards.

In 1970, Henry Itkin and Kenny Rhodes, a relatively unknown American pair, suddenly began achieving results that better players believed were beyond their capabilities. Their code was cracked by Steve Robinson, a well-known tournament player, who realized that, when Rhodes sorted his hand after picking it up, he moved the cards in a way that telegraphed his entire holding to Itkin. Robinson told me that he had observed them during a tournament without being able to decipher what they were doing, but as he drove home afterward he reviewed a hand in his mind, and the system suddenly came to him. "If he took cards from the right and put them back in the right side of the hand, that represented one," he said. "Right to the center was two, right to the left was three. Center to the right was four." The signaller would give counts on three suits—first spades, then hearts, then diamonds—and then use similar movements to show strength. The code was so complex that the pair usually used it in just one direction (only Itkin could reliably read it). In 1979, two other American partners,



*"Hold on—I'm in the middle of one of Cher's fascinating political tweets."*

Lester Holt  
Iowa Caucuses



We go to the story  
so you get the story.

**NIGHTLY NEWS**  
with LESTER HOLT

Steve Sion and Alan Cokin, were caught signalling to each other with their scoring pencils, and were expelled from the American Contract Bridge League. "Steve Sion was one of the best declarers in the game," Paul Linxwiler, the executive editor of *Bridge Bulletin*, the A.C.B.L.'s monthly magazine, told me. "But he hated the idea that a less talented player might beat him." Sion and Cokin were reinstated after five years, and Cokin never got into trouble again. But Sion was thrown out permanently in 1997, after being caught doing the equivalent of stacking the deck with a tournament's pre-dealt hands.

Cheating scandals lead, inevitably, to enhancements in security. Even in games at local bridge clubs nowadays, bids are made not by speaking them (and possibly imparting unauthorized information through inflection) but by silently displaying pre-printed bidding cards. Hands at big tournaments are dealt not by people but by machines, and each deal is recorded, making tampering virtually impossible. For top matches at important tournaments, each table is fitted with a single diagonal screen, which prevents partners from seeing each other during the bidding and makes changes in tempo harder to interpret. And, because of the Italian Foot Soldiers, in big matches dividers are placed under tables as well as on top of them.

In 2014, two German physicians, who had won a World Pairs Championship, were banned for ten years by the World Bridge Federation for using an auditory signalling system. (They're now known as the Coughing Doctors.) Their method was so crude that they were relatively easy to catch, but, in general, as security measures have become more sophisticated, methods of evading them have become more sophisticated, too—like the arms race between e-mailers and spammers.

WHEN BROGELAND MADE his first announcement, his evidence against Fisher and Schwartz consisted solely of what he believed to be a collection of suspicious hands; he still didn't know how they might be exchanging information. A few days later,

he created a new Web site, called *Bridgecheaters.com*, and posted three YouTube videos from the 2014 European Team Championships, which Fisher and Schwartz's team had won. Each video had been shot from a camera mounted near the table. It showed all four players, as well as the table paraphernalia of modern tournament bridge: four bidding boxes (containing each player's pre-printed bidding cards); a felt-covered bidding tray (on which the players place bidding cards before sliding it back under the screen); and a plastic duplicate board (a flat, rectangular box in which four pre-dealt hands have been delivered to the table). Brogeland asked for help from other players, and the search for evidence immediately became a collaborative international project.

Not long after his Web site went up, Brogeland received a tip that Fisher and Schwartz had been in trouble before, when they were teen-agers. With aid from several players, he obtained documents showing that, beginning in 2003, the Israeli Bridge Federation had disciplined Fisher and Schwartz more than once for ethical violations in junior events. In 2005, Fisher was caught with a slip of paper containing information about a hand his table hadn't played yet, and the I.B.F. suspended him for two years, forbade him to represent Israel in bridge for an additional eighteen months, and placed

But Per-Ola Cullin, a young Swedish player, noticed something strange. I spoke with him on the phone recently, after his children had gone to bed. He said, "I actually thought that Boye knew what they were doing, and was just trying to find out if others could see it as well. It turns out that he didn't know, but when I watched the video I kind of saw it right away." The tactic that Cullin identified involved the opening lead, one of the most difficult plays in bridge, because it usually has to be made with no knowledge of the other hands except what has been deduced from the auction. A bridge player who somehow found the ideal opening lead on every hand would be like a tennis pro who never missed a first serve.

One day last month, I asked Weinstein to show me the code that Cullin had broken. He and his wife live in a big house on the outskirts of Andes, New York, a tiny town not far from where he grew up, but I visited him at a smaller house, in a suburban neighborhood in New Jersey, which they recently began renting, mainly to shorten Weinstein's many trips to and from the airport. The furnishings consisted of little more than a couch, a coffeemaker, and a big round table. I'd brought a bidding tray and a duplicate board to use as props. "When the bidding is over, you have to get these things out of the way," Weinstein said, demonstrating. "The pair sitting North-South almost always handles that—and Fisher and Schwartz always wanted to sit North-South." Usually, North moves the bidding tray to the floor or to a nearby chair, and puts the duplicate board in the center of the table, directly under the screen.

On deals in which Fisher and Schwartz ended up as declarer and dummy, they cleared away the tray and the board in the usual manner. But when they were defending—meaning that one of them would make the opening lead—they were wildly inconsistent. Sometimes Fisher would remove the tray, and sometimes Schwartz would, and sometimes they would leave it on the table. Furthermore, they placed the duplicate board in a number of different positions—each of which, it turns out, conveyed a particular meaning. "If Lotan wanted a



him on probation for five years beyond that. Schwartz was also suspended and placed on probation in 2005, for a different offense. Yet, even before their probations were over, they had reemerged as a pair.

As Brogeland had requested, players around the world studied the videos of Fisher and Schwartz—at first, without success. "I thought it must be something electronic, because I couldn't figure it out," Jeff Meckstroth told me.

## FROM THE AENEID BOOK VI

Elsewhere Anchises,  
Fatherly and intent, was off in a deep green valley  
Surveying and reviewing souls consigned there,  
Those due to pass to the light of the upper world.  
It so happened he was just then taking note

Of his whole posterity, the destinies and doings,  
Traits and qualities of descendants dear to him,  
But seeing Aeneas come wading through the grass  
Towards him, he reached his two hands out  
In eager joy, his eyes filled up with tears  
And he gave a cry: "At last! Are you here at last?  
I always trusted that your sense of right  
Would prevail and keep you going to the end.  
And am I now allowed to see your face,  
My son, and hear you talk, and talk to you myself?"

This is what I imagined and looked forward to  
As I counted the days; and my trust was not misplaced.  
To think of the lands and the outlying seas  
You have crossed, my son, to receive this welcome.  
And after such dangers! I was afraid that Africa  
Might be your undoing." But Aeneas replied:  
"Often and often, father, you would appear to me,  
Your sad shade would appear, and that kept me going  
To this end. My ships are anchored in the Tuscan sea.  
Let me take your hand, my father, O let me, and do not

Hold back from my embrace." And as he spoke he wept.  
Three times he tried to reach arms round that neck.  
Three times the form, reached for in vain, escaped  
Like a breeze between his hands, a dream on wings.

—Virgil

*(Translated, from the Latin, by Seamus Heaney, 1939–2013.)*

spade lead, he put the board in the middle and pushed it all the way to the other side," Weinstein said. If he wanted a heart, he put it to the right. Diamond, over here. Club, here. No preference, here." Using that key, a leading professional stayed up all night studying the hands, then published a detailed synopsis of the crucial plays in a post on Bridgewinners. A British Web designer, who plays recreationally, used that analysis to assemble an explanatory highlight reel, and uploaded it to YouTube.

The team on which Fisher and Schwartz played last summer was sponsored by Jimmy Cayne, the former head of Bear Stearns. (Cayne was

criticized in the press during the global financial crisis for seeming to care more about bridge than about Bear Stearns. He stepped down shortly before the firm's collapse, and since then he's had fewer distractions.) After studying the videotapes, Cayne announced that he would drop Fisher and Schwartz from his team unless they were vindicated, and that he would willingly forfeit everything he had won while they were employed by him.

**A**S THE SCANDAL involving the Israelis was unfolding, Brogeland received an e-mail from Maaike Mevius, a physicist in the Netherlands, whose specialty is astronomy. She said

that the revelations about Fisher and Schwartz had got her wondering about other partnerships, and that she had studied other tournament videos available on YouTube. She was especially interested in Fulvio Fantoni and Claudio Nunes, who were then ranked No. 1 and No. 2 by the World Bridge Federation. Both players are Italian, but in 2010 they moved to Monaco after being hired to play on the Monegasque national team, which is led and financed by a wealthy Swiss businessman. Rumors about them had been circulating among bridge players for several years, and Mevius thought that her scientific training might enable her to spot something that others had missed. She told Brogeland that she had indeed seen something, although she wasn't an accomplished enough player to be sure of its significance. What she had noticed was that, when either Fantoni or Nunes made an opening lead, he sometimes placed the card on the table horizontally, and sometimes vertically.

Brogeland followed up, with help from a number of other top players. Meckstroth told me that he had been convinced since 2014 that Fantoni and Nunes were cheating. He said that he had been trying for a year, without success, to persuade the A.C.B.L. to investigate them, and had spent many hours studying tapes himself, but without spotting the opening-lead pattern. With Mevius's clue, though, the cheat became obvious: in eighty-two of eighty-five videotaped hands, Fantoni or Nunes led a card vertically when his remaining holding in the same suit contained an ace, a king, or a queen, and horizontally when it didn't. Weinstein asked a bridge-playing math professor at the University of Chicago to calculate the probability of such a precise correlation's occurring by chance. The professor, in an e-mail, said that the number was "so small it is not worth working out exactly," but that it would be roughly ".0000 . . . where at least the first eighteen digits are zeros." (Fantoni denied all allegations of cheating by him and Nunes.)

A few days after the accusations concerning Fantoni and Nunes, another leading pair, Josef Piekarek and

Alex Smirnov, of Germany, confessed that they had been cheating. They said they were “aware of the ‘whispers’” about their “ethical conduct,” and that these whispers contained “some truth.” In fact, there was more than some truth, and their confession wasn’t entirely voluntary. Brogeland had compiled evidence—one of their signals involved placing their bidding cards in unusual positions on the bidding trays—and he and Weinstein had given them an opportunity to step forward before being outed. Their entire team withdrew from the World Bridge Championships, which were to begin a week later, in Chennai, India. I’ve watched, also on YouTube, a remarkable video in which Piekarek and Smirnov are playing Fisher and Schwartz in a tournament match, and Fisher appears to catch Smirnov trying to cheat. Smirnov places a bidding card on the bidding tray in an unusual position, and Fisher apparently obliterates the signal by shaking the tray as he slides it to the other side of the screen. Fisher smirks, then writes something on a piece of paper and shows it to Smirnov. Smirnov shrugs, glances at the video camera, and looks around the room.

**T**HE DAMAGE THAT Lance Armstrong did to the careers of other competitive cyclists, and to cycling itself, is incalculable, and it seems conceivable that the sport will never fully recover. The recent alleged cheating incidents in bridge are in some ways just as egregious. “The thing about Fantoni and Nunes that’s so upsetting,” Weinstein told me, “is that they fucked up the game since 2002, when they won the World Open Pairs, so for a decade and a half, almost, they have ruined the records of bridge.” Yet virtually every player I’ve talked to, Weinstein among them, views the recent incidents as highly positive events. Effectively pursuing bridge cheaters used to be difficult, partly because the governing bodies were fearful of being sued, and partly because cheating could be extremely difficult to prove. Older players often exhibited what now seems like a fatalistic attitude about dishonest opponents, even in cases they believed

to be obvious. But YouTube changed that, and Bridgewinners has given top-level players a global discussion-and-support forum—two empowering developments for honest players. In January, the American Contract Bridge League gave Brogeland its annual sportsmanship award.

The charges against Fisher, Schwartz, Fantoni, and Nunes are still officially only allegations: no national bridge organization has ruled on any of the current cases, and the four players have hired lawyers and prepared defenses. (Fisher and Schwartz told Brogeland that they wouldn’t sue him if he retracted his accusations and paid them a million dollars; Brogeland has said that he would welcome a lawsuit.) A number of hearings have been scheduled, but even if no organization ultimately takes action, it’s unlikely that any of the players will compete again—certainly not as partners. “They’re done,” one pro told me.

In the future, catching cheaters will presumably be more difficult. Several players I spoke with said that Fisher and Schwartz might have evaded detection indefinitely if they had been less brazen, and that the reason so many incidents were exposed all at once is that, until very recently, tournament videotapes weren’t readily available, and dishonest players didn’t understand their power. Now that they do understand, cheaters will become craftier in their deceptions, and the main tool for catching them will almost certainly be statistical analysis of suspicious results. It’s also likely that major bridge organizations will adopt binding arbitration requirements, thereby eliminating the intimidation presented by lawsuits. Team sponsors could take that idea a step further, by adding ethics clauses to all of their player contracts.

Several players have proposed technological fixes, such as a computerized tournament table, at which players wouldn’t use actual cards at all, and would bid and play roughly the way they do online. But tournament players I talked to said they would be reluctant to move the game so far from its analog origins. Brogeland told me that what he thinks the game really needs is a firmer cultural commitment

to ethical play. “I think we should be more focussed on that,” he said. “If you’re always trying things to make cheating more difficult, it’s like biting your tail.” Bridge, in other words, should try to be more like golf, the only major sport in which players call penalties on themselves, and not at all like football, in which a running back would be considered almost negligent if he didn’t try to shove the ball a few inches farther forward after being tackled.

No matter what eventually happens, players today seem less resigned to unethical behavior by opponents than players of the past sometimes did—no doubt partly because, for the time being, they have the tools to fight it. Brogeland has set a powerful example, but the attitude he represents had been building for some time. Two years ago, after the World Bridge Federation banned the Coughing Doctors from competition, the overwhelming majority of responders to a poll on Bridgewinners said that, in proven cases of cheating, titles should be stripped from the cheaters’ teammates as well as from the cheaters themselves—a position that players and governing bodies in the past haven’t always embraced. And Weinstein told me that, at a tournament two or three years ago, Fisher approached him and said he understood that Weinstein had been telling people behind his back that he and Schwartz were cheating. “I said, ‘No, I’ll tell you to your face,’ ” Weinstein continued. “I said I could show him fourteen hands on which I know he had cheated. He said, ‘Well, we don’t cheat—but what would you do if you were in my position?’ And I said, ‘I don’t know, Lotan. I really can’t relate to that, because I would never be in your position.’ ” ♦

#### Block That Metaphor!

From the Associated Press.

The Beatles landed on a trigger point when they hit America. It was a pop culture sonic boom spurred by talent, timing and luck that’s still rattling the windows.

“This was a seismic shift in American culture and it gave teenagers not only a voice but a way of being, a way of thinking that had never occurred before,” Beatles biographer Bob Spitz said.

## SUNDAY ROUTINE

BY JEN SPYRA



As all New Yorkers know, the best section in the *New York Times* bar none is the "Sunday Routine." . . . Seems like everyone does pretty much the same stuff on Sunday. So what makes the "Sunday Routine" section so fascinating?

—Gawker.

**UP AND AT 'EM:** My day starts at seven, when our dog, Percival, and our kids, Madisonaddison and Andersoncooper, jump into bed with us. Percival is a Pigapoo, which is a very rare breed. It's a cross between a Shih Tzu and a pig. Percival has breathing problems, because he's an affront to God's plan and isn't supposed to exist, so we have to be very careful when we're roughhousing with him, or he'll suffocate and we'll have to introduce our kids to the concept of death.

**BREAKFAST IN BED:** On Sundays, we throw all our healthy habits out the window and really indulge, so it's nothing but salami, doughnuts, and vegetable oil. Brian, my husband, makes the meanest salami-doughnut-vegetable-oil slop.

**BREAKING A SWEAT:** I like to get exercise out of the way in the morning so I can relax for the rest of the day. Right now, I'm completely obsessed

with the Dock Method, which is this thing where you work on the docks for a few hours, tossing cargo into shipping holds, and they pay you \$6.75 an hour. The guys in my class are super ripped, which is very motivating.

**CULTURE CLUB:** After we've had our breakfast and moved around a little, we like to do something culturally enriching as a family, so usually it's off to the Met to stroll through the vaults where they keep the stolen Nazi art. We have a platinum membership, which gets you into all the chambers.

**UNPLUG AND UNWIND:** We've recently started doing this thing where we totally disconnect for a few hours, and it's been really liberating. No cell phones, no iPads, no laptops, nothing. We don't even use language. We limit ourselves to vowel sounds and grunts, and just get back in touch with our primal selves, roaming around the apartment, pissing and shitting at will, and foraging for scraps of salami. Heaven.

**GENDER CHECK-IN:** We don't want the kids to be influenced by us or by society or by anybody when it comes to choosing their genders, so we're giv-

ing them time to decide, and they're still thinking about it. We don't want their decision to be influenced by the genitals that they happened to be born with, so we keep them dressed in breathable-cotton chastity belts, and as soon as they decide their genders we'll take them off so they can see which sex organs they have. They're only sophomores, so we've still got time before the big college search.

**GROCERY SHOPPING:** Sometimes, in the afternoon, we'll go grocery shopping for the week. Get milk, eggs, bread. Stuff like that.

**DROP IN ON SECRET FAMILY:** I'll check in with my secret family for a few hours—make sure the heat's on, that there are groceries in the fridge, that kind of thing.

**PERCIVAL'S P.T.:** Because Percival is such a special breed, he has several genetic defects. For example, he was born without legs. Brian takes him to physical therapy at a wonderful vet we've been going to for years, and he'll practice strengthening his neck so that he can pull himself forward.

**TAKE EVERYONE IN A PEDIATRIC ONCOLOGY WARD TO SEE "HAMILTON":** Nothing makes you feel more grateful to be alive than popping into a pediatric oncology ward, saying, "Come on, everybody!" and whisking all the patients away to see the hit Broadway musical "Hamilton." Even though many of the children are terminal cases, they can still heed Alexander Hamilton's tip to not waste their shot with the time they've got left.

**DINNER:** On Sunday nights, we like to take it easy and stay in, so Brian will do something simple, like take some olive oil, salt, and lemon and sprinkle it on a huge pile of salami, doughnuts, and vegetable oil.

**ODDS AND ENDS:** When the dishes are done, I'll catch up on e-mail, help the kids with their homework, and see if any of my bids on Nazi-plundered art have come through.

**WATCH "KINGPIN":** We'll watch "Kingpin" a couple of times. Once for laughs, and once more to appreciate the craft.

**BEDTIME:** After a glass of liquid melatonin, a few minutes of meditation, some gentle stretching, and a Motrin 800, I'm out like a light. ♦

## LIVING-ROOM DEMOCRACY

*In rural Egypt, political candidates go door-to-door.*

BY PETER HESSLER



Yusuf, a candidate for parliament in Upper Egypt, greets a supporter.

**T**HIS PAST FALL in El-Balyana, a remote district in Upper Egypt, there were nineteen candidates for two seats in the new national parliament, and none of them seemed to enjoy the campaign more than Yusuf Hasan Yusuf. He was a big man in his mid-forties, with smooth, dark skin that was set off by a white galabia. He had nine children, a jewelry shop, and a farm where he grew wheat, corn, and sugarcane. He campaigned entirely door-to-door—in his opinion, public political activity served no purpose. “If you have those rallies, it’s fake,” Yusuf told me. He had no platform, and he didn’t talk about issues, policies, or potential legislation. He never made a single public campaign promise. In the past, he hadn’t enjoyed the support of any party or other institution, and yet he had built a successful political career. Once, I asked a rival candidate how he did it.

“Yusuf is lucky,” he said, somewhat

grudgingly. “Yusuf is a simple, kind man, and he’s lucky.”

Yusuf first won a seat in parliament in December of 2010. Running as an independent, he defeated the local candidate from the National Democratic Party, which had ruled a de-facto one-party state for more than thirty years. Less than two months later, the revolution began on Tahrir Square, and soon President Hosni Mubarak resigned from office, the parliament was cancelled, and the N.D.P. was disbanded. Afterward, Islamists were allowed to form political parties for the first time, and they won more than seventy per cent of the seats in the next parliamentary campaign, in the winter of 2011-12. In El-Balyana, though, Yusuf received many more votes than the local candidate from the Muslim Brotherhood’s political organization, the Freedom and Justice Party. Once again, Yusuf travelled to Cairo to take office, and once again the parliament

was soon cancelled, this time by a court order. In the summer of 2013, after nationwide protests, the military forcibly removed the country’s first democratically elected President, Mohamed Morsi, who had been a leader of the Brotherhood, which was quickly banned as a terrorist organization.

When I asked Yusuf what he had learned from these events, he had trouble answering, and I realized that the question assumed a logic that doesn’t apply to Egypt. From Yusuf’s perspective, losers of elections tended to see their organizations banned or dissolved, whereas winners joined a lawmaking body that also tended to be banned or dissolved. “I didn’t know what really happened, whether it was a legitimate court order or something else,” Yusuf said, of the cancellation of the second parliament. Since then, the government had repeatedly delayed elections, and Egypt had had no parliament for three years. In the meantime, Yusuf continued to do what he does best. “I’m always campaigning—it never stops,” he told me last June, months before the new elections had even been scheduled. Two other local parliamentarians had remained on leave from their jobs since 2012, in part so that they could campaign more or less continuously.

El-Balyana sits on the Nile’s western bank, about three hundred miles upstream from Cairo, where the narrow river valley is surrounded by high, barren bluffs. Beyond the bluffs, in both directions, the desert is uninhabitable across all of North Africa. Upper Egypt is densely settled—about forty per cent of Egyptians live in the south—and it’s the poorest and the most neglected part of the country. Over the years, Upper Egyptians have responded to national dysfunction by effectively creating their own system for elections. Even under N.D.P. rule, Upper Egyptians developed local versions of parties, and they devised indigenous campaign traditions. This informal system survived both the Arab Spring and its aftermath; in some respects, it’s as stable as any other Egyptian political institution. These southern election campaigns reflect how, in a repressive but weak state, the problem isn’t just the ways in which the government prevents

political freedom. It's also the flawed organizations that people build when left entirely to their own devices.

**I**N EL-BALYANA, YUSUF's main rival was Rafat Mohamed Mahmoud, who was his opposite in almost every respect. Rafat had belonged to the N.D.P., but after the revolution he became an independent; in 2012, he narrowly defeated the Brotherhood candidate for the district's second seat, behind Yusuf. For this election, Rafat had again changed affiliation: he joined the Free Egyptians Party, which had been founded by Naguib Sawiris, a Coptic Christian who is one of the richest men in the country. Rafat himself came from a wealthy extended family, known as the Abu'l Khair, and on the first evening that I observed his campaign he travelled around to private homes with an entourage of a dozen relatives, in a Mercedes sedan, a Jeep S.U.V., and two other vehicles.

One member of the entourage was in charge of terminating each home visit. His name was Abu Steit, and he was a short, pudgy man with a toothbrush mustache who carried a wooden cane and wore a turban. At every stop, the group was escorted into the *dawar*, the traditional rural Egyptian reception area, where the family's elders waited. At the entrance, the young men of the family had lined up to greet the visitors. Each of them offered a cigarette to every guest—sometimes I was formally presented with twenty cigarettes in rapid succession. Throughout the visit, the young men brought trays of drinks for the elders, although Abu Steit often waved them off and shouted, "*Halawa!*"—sweets. In Upper Egypt, social engagements run late, and by midnight I had lost track of how many chocolate bars Abu Steit had consumed. As his blood sugar rose, so did my fascination: there was something magnetic about a little man with a Hitler mustache who, after tossing away an empty candy wrapper, would suddenly pound his cane on the ground and yell, "*Al Fatiha! Al Fatiha!*" The Fatiha is the first Surah of the Koran, and it was recited to bless Rafat's departure. A home visit might last for half an hour, or it could be finished in a minute; only Abu Steit seemed to know the appropriate duration.

Many visits were characterized by long stretches of silence. There was no stump speech or formal introduction, and Rafat rarely spoke. He was a tall man in an expensive pin-striped galabia, and often he sat in the place of honor, staring into space, until Abu Steit mercifully called for the Fatiha. Nobody ever mentioned Rafat's N.D.P. past or his current political affiliation, whose benefit was primarily financial. In El-Balyana, a Cairo-based party like the Free Egyptians might pay for posters and other campaign expenses, but it had no local office or network. There was no functioning local press that allowed a party to promote specific issues or policies. This was one reason that candidates campaigned entirely door-to-door. El-Balyana consists of two small cities and thirty-three villages, with a population of around six hundred thousand, but candidates were able to cover this large region in part because they had started long before the official election season. On the fifth day of the campaign, I met a person whose home had already been visited by ten candidates.

Instead of parties, the campaign revolved around two local tribes: the Hawwara, to which Yusuf belonged, and the Arabs, a tribe that included Rafat. When I first began visiting El-Balyana, in early 2013, these groups impressed me as indistinguishable: they spoke the same dialect of Arabic; they dressed and lived the same way; they looked like members of the same ethnic group. All of them were Muslim; most of them were farmers. I had never thought of Egypt as having a tribal society—unlike other parts of the Middle East, it's always been an agricultural country. But most people in El-Balyana were adamant that they had descended from nomadic tribes.

One prominent member of Rafat's entourage was his cousin, Souleiman Abu'l Khair, an actor who often plays Upper Egyptian roles on television. Late in the evening, the campaign visited a wealthy landowner named Zabit Gebr, an elder of his family, who asked Souleiman to find a good screenwriter to produce a script about their tribe. "We want a serious soap opera that represents the Arabs," Zabit said. "We want the guy who wrote the series 'Sheikh al-Arab Hamam,'" he went on. "But there was a problem—he described somebody

from the Hawwara as if he were Arab." Zabit embarked on a long analysis of other shows that, in his opinion, also conflated tribes. He said that the Arabs needed to do a better job of establishing their identity in the entertainment industry. "Keep raising our heads for all of Egypt, *inshallah*," he said to the actor.

"Have you watched 'Khalaf Allah?'" Souleiman asked.

"I just watched two episodes."

"You have to watch it, because I play a good role."

"Facebook ruined our eyesight. It has weakened my eyes, man."

**I**N TRUTH, THE history of some tribes in Upper Egypt is a recent creation. During medieval times, some nomadic Bedouin groups, including the Hawwara, migrated from northwestern Africa. But they intermarried with natives and adopted local culture, and there were many other outsiders who also settled in the region, ranging from Greek traders to Turkish administrators. There had never been a tribe called "the Arabs"—the term was popularized in the nineteen-fifties, as part of Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism. In Upper Egypt, it replaced *fellahin*, or "peasants," which had negative connotations.

During the past thirty years, though, the Arabs have been reimagined, along with other groups in the region. "In the nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, the tribes were not very important," Hans Christian Korsholm Nielsen, a Danish anthropologist who researches Upper Egyptian politics, told me. "But they had an electoral system that needed some group, and the tribes came in handy." Mubarak had emphasized parliamentary elections as a way of claiming that Egypt was democratic, although the vote was often rigged in the major cities. But in the neglected south, Nielsen said, elections tended to run more freely, with the N.D.P. recruiting whoever happened to win. In this unstructured but competitive environment, where there were essentially no institutions, people naturally turned to the organization that they knew best: the family. They expanded the concept of tribal identity, sometimes creating elaborate backgrounds for groups that hadn't existed. Near the city of

Aswan, Nielsen observed a candidate who enlisted a regional historian to lecture voters on their supposed tribal past.

In the north, a victorious politician could direct state funds toward projects that benefitted his supporters, but expectations were more modest in El-Balyana. During home visits, a voter sometimes asked a candidate to make a call on his behalf, usually to a government office that issued permits or handled utilities. This was part of the reason that the campaign was so personal: knowing that candidates had no institutional support, voters asked for only small favors. And yet Upper Egyptians seemed to care much more about the election than Cairenes did. Pride was a factor, and the campaigns also served to reinforce family structures. Egyptian families tend to be strictly hierarchical, especially in the south, where the elders clearly enjoyed barking orders at lines of young men.

They also expected to decide the votes of their family members. Zabit, the elder who asked about soap operas, told me that he directed six hundred people of voting age in his extended family. "When I give the order on the day of the election, then the people have to go to the polling station and vote," he said. "It's not their business whether it's wrong or right." He told me that he didn't really care who won the election; for him, the main value seemed to be the opportunity to assert control over his clan. And he did this publicly—the day after our visit, Zabit announced on Facebook that his family would vote for Rafat.

**I**N EGYPT, THE majority of the population is under the age of twenty-five. The autocratic behavior of male elders—ordering drinks, dictating votes, wielding virtually all power—is even more striking in the light of their scarcity. Men aged fifty-five or older make up only 5.7 per cent of the population.

Large numbers of young Egyptians are underemployed or jobless, and they dominated the Tahrir protests in 2011. One of the revolution's demands was that the young be given a greater role in the political system. For the first parliamentary elections that followed, two-thirds of the seats were reserved for members of lists: candidates who shared party affiliations or other alliances, and

whose ranks had to include people under the age of thirty-five, women, Christians, and other traditionally underrepresented groups.

During that campaign, the youngest Egyptian to win a list seat came from El-Balyana. He was a twenty-six-year-old named Mahmoud Hamdy Ahmed, and he was one of Rafat's cousins and a member of the Abu'l Khair family. Unlike Rafat, who had established himself with the N.D.P., Mahmoud rose



with the sudden proliferation of post-Tahrir parties. He joined the Nour Party, which represented the Salafi movement, a conservative strain of Islam that originated in the Persian Gulf region. Nour won about a quarter of the seats nationwide, and, together with the Muslim Brotherhood, it was seen as the vanguard of Egypt's new political Islam.

But Nour representatives often clashed with Brotherhood members in parliament, and in July, 2013, when President Morsi was deposed, the leaders of the Nour endorsed the change. Later that summer, security forces massacred more than eight hundred Morsi supporters in Cairo, according to Human Rights Watch, and the violence alienated many grassroots members of the Nour. In 2015, when a government commission set the rules for the new parliamentary elections, it drastically reduced the number of list seats.

Over time, the Nour Party weakened, and Mahmoud renounced his membership and became an independent. But he kept the beard. No other candidate in El-Balyana appeared on posters with full Salafi facial hair, in which only the mustache is shaved. The beard is a powerful symbol, but local interpretations of Mahmoud's ranged widely: some people said that he was a true fundamentalist, while others claimed that he was an opportunist who had briefly latched on to the Salafi movement before discarding it. In the past, the Abu'l

Khair family hadn't been politically powerful, until some members went to Kuwait as guest workers in the nineteen-eighties and became rich enough to run big campaigns. By adopting a Salafi persona, Mahmoud had distanced himself from Rafat and his N.D.P. past. Village conspiracy theorists told me that the cousins used the veneer of national politics to distract from the most salient fact: that the Abu'l Khair family was rising to unprecedented local wealth and status.

When I first visited Mahmoud's *dawar*, I found a tall, thin young man whose eyes reflected shrewdness and suspicion in equal measure. He had been trained as a pharmacist, a career that attracts bright students in Egypt. I interviewed him with a translator, but he seemed unwilling or unable to answer any specific questions about policies or potential legislation. This was common in El-Balyana, where candidates rarely had any meaningful experience with the press. But, when I asked Mahmoud why he had left the Nour Party, his response was blunt. "The street wants candidates to be independent," he said. He insisted that he was neither a Salafi nor an Islamist. "Here it's a tribal system," he said. "There's the Hawwara and the Arabs, and that's it. Nothing else. No Islamists or non-Islamists."

Mahmoud campaigned in a Mercedes 200 sedan whose back window was decorated with his official symbol, a military cannon, along with the slogan "Your Hand in My Hand . . . We Build for Your Children and for Mine." The campaign positioned wooden cannons at busy intersections in El-Balyana, and white plastic cannons, their muzzles pointed upward, were attached to the roofs of three-wheeled tuk-tuk cabs, which cruised around town like an undersized cavalry.

Campaign symbols are mandatory because more than a quarter of Egyptians are illiterate. The rate in the south is even higher—at some El-Balyana polling stations, judges told me that the majority of the voters couldn't read. In each district, the selection of symbols is like a fantasy draft, with candidates choosing from a hundred and sixty government-approved icons. Some of them seem to have dubious connotations: a knife, an ambulance, a scorpion.

One option is a feather, like Dan Quayle in the old “Doonesbury” cartoons. This year, two candidates in greater Cairo were represented by a rifle and a megaphone. The top draft pick in El-Balyana was wasted on a chandelier, the political equivalent of the Knicks grabbing Renaldo Balkman. Mahmoud told me that he selected the cannon because “the others had already been taken.” But this made no sense—he had picked fourth. Still, I couldn’t help but be impressed by a reformed Islamist who showed up for the first post-coup parliamentary election sporting a cannon and a Salafi beard. Given the security climate, it seemed every bit as brave as the Cairo candidate who campaigned under the slogan “No to Terrorism.”

**I**N EL-BALYANA, DURING the first year after the revolution, Morsi won a broad majority in the Presidential election, and the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice candidate was just behind Rafat for the second non-list parliamentary seat. For most of its history, the Brotherhood had been banned, but it had a reputation for charity and grassroots organizing. In elections, it performed well across Upper Egypt, which was often described as a Brotherhood stronghold.

But in El-Balyana the Brotherhood had only one small office, and I found no evidence of significant charitable activities. The same was true in most other parts of the south that I visited during the Morsi era. I came to believe that the Brotherhood was remarkably weak, and it won elections only because there was no organized competition. In April, 2013, I met with Ayman Abdel Hamid, a physician in El-Balyana and a Brotherhood leader who was slated to run in the next parliamentary election. He told me that there were only a hundred and fifty Brothers in the district.

Last summer, I visited Ayman again, at his small private clinic. In Cairo, it’s virtually impossible to meet Brothers, but Ayman told me that the local crackdown is lighter, in part because the family system insulates against national events. He said that only two Brothers from El-Balyana have been imprisoned, and he and others are left alone because they aren’t active in the Brotherhood anymore. He told me that poverty is

also a factor in the gentler response from the state security forces. “Since life is already hard, they don’t want to make it harder,” he said.

I reminded him that in 2013 he had told me there were a hundred and fifty local members. “That was the crowd around the Brotherhood, not the real members,” Ayman said. “We were trying to exaggerate the numbers to scare other parties. It was just election tactics.”

I asked what the real number had been.

“Ten members,” he said, and smiled sadly. “Those were two of our mistakes. We exaggerated the number of our members to scare others. And we allowed some people to act like they were with us, but in truth they weren’t.”

It seemed remarkable: in a district of around six hundred thousand, an organization with only ten local members had dominated the Presidential vote and nearly won a parliamentary seat. Along with the Nour, the Brotherhood had been particularly popular among young men in Upper Egypt. I sensed that this didn’t reflect a deep faith in political Islam; instead, young people had grasped at any alternative to local traditions that forced them to do things like fetch chocolate bars for old men. Now that the Islamists had been decimated, the traditional system reasserted itself. In El-Balyana, the first round of voting, in mid-October, reduced the field to four finalists: Yusuf, Rafat, Mahmoud, and a former police brigadier

named Nour Abu Steit. In tribal terms, the split was perfect: two Hawwara and two Arabs.

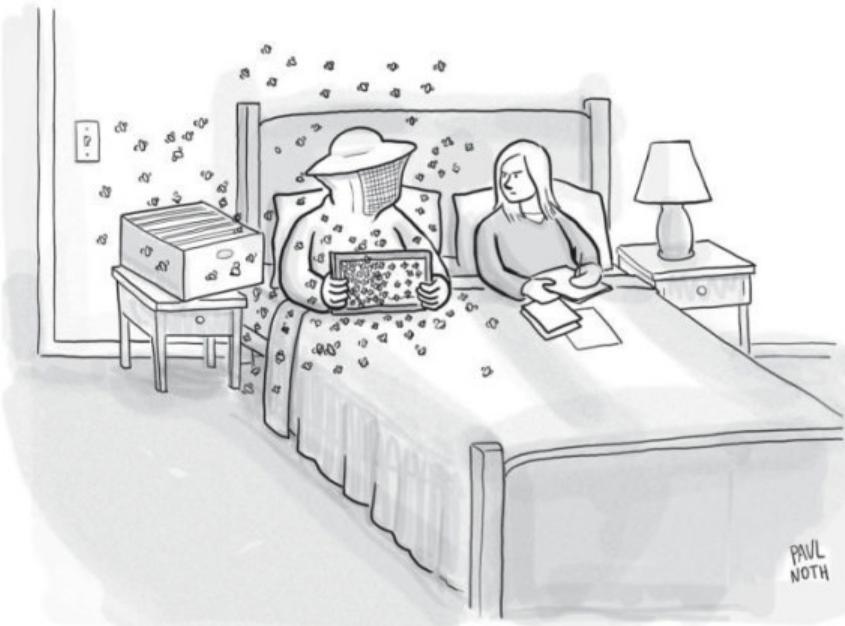
**O**NE OF THE eliminated candidates was Mahmoud Abu Mohasseb, a lawyer whom I had known for more than two years. In 2010, he had performed respectably in another local election, but this time he finished seventeenth out of nineteen. Afterward, he stopped picking up my calls. When I knocked on his apartment door, I heard his son’s muffled voice: “Daddy’s not coming.”

In his village, close relatives also hadn’t seen him. “Others are mocking us,” Khaled Abu Mohasseb, the candidate’s cousin, told me. “These results are shameful. It doesn’t suit the name of the family.”

Khaled had helped his cousin campaign, but now he said that the candidacy had failed because of lack of effort. It seemed unfair—even months before the vote, I had seen him making home visits. But, when I asked Khaled if he felt sorry for his cousin, he shook his head. “I feel more sorry for myself and for the family,” he said.

In El-Balyana, it seemed very hard to lose gracefully. One bitter candidate told me that his family had engaged in fraud; another announced that he was moving to Cairo because of “the stink of politics.” Mohammed Abu Hilely, a prominent eliminated candidate from the Arab tribe, told me that Rafat and Mahmoud—his fellow-tribesmen—had





*"Oh, but it's fine for you to grade papers?"*

• •

paid off voters. Hilely posted a public statement on YouTube, calling upon the Arabs to support the two Hawwara candidates instead.

One evening, villagers in a coffee shop discussed Hilely's actions. Some believed that he had made his plea because his political career was finished, but Ahmed Diyab, a psychologist at the local elementary school, predicted that the final outcome would be a classic case of reverse psychology. By asking his tribesmen to support the Hawwara, Hilely had guaranteed that they would vote for the Arabs in even higher numbers.

Diyab claimed that being a psychologist who works with children helped him understand local political behavior. "Maybe a kid is peeing on himself as a way of attracting attention," he said. "Maybe I have a problem, but I can't express myself, so I use violence." After years of Cairo conversations, I found his analysis refreshing. In the capital, the élite often talk about "the deep state," the military and financial interests that supposedly control everything. Others nurse conspiracy theories that connect the United States, Qatar, Israel, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

It felt simpler in a more isolated place, where one could recognize how social

traditions contribute to political dysfunction. I suspected that Cairo isn't much different at its core—even there, institutions are weak, and family hierarchies dominate most people's lives. Officials respond to events in ways that feel more personal than political, and general patterns resemble those in El-Balyana, with all the conspiracy theories and the wild accusations of wrongdoing. Losers lash out, and anger is a common emotion, as is pride. The old control the young; the men control the women. But none of it can really be blamed on the Brotherhood, or the N.D.P., or any particular political figure. In Egypt, the family is the deep state.

THROUGHOUT THE CAMPAIGN, I never saw a candidate interact with a woman. During dozens of home visits, no one even asked after the health of the women who lived there. In southern villages, men sequester wives, daughters, and sisters; some elders told me that they forbade females from voting. When they did vote, they required special infrastructure. One advantage of wealth was that it allowed a candidate to hire vehicles to transport groups of women to polling stations. When I interviewed Nora Abdel Mohammed, who was one of the few women in her

El-Balyana village with a government job, she told me that the revolution had done nothing to change gender relations. "Women in the homes need somebody to reach them," she said, explaining that housewives from different families rarely meet with one another, because there's no female equivalent of the *darawar*.

In prominent families, *darawar* are impressive open-air courtyards, and only once did I hear a woman mentioned in this environment. The night before the runoff election, in late October, I visited the riverside *darawar* of Nour Abu Steit, the fourth finalist. He was a short, fierce-looking man who had recently retired from the police. He was Hawwara, and he began our conversation by claiming that the Abu'l Khair cousins had engaged in fraud. Such accusations were common, although nobody ever offered any evidence, and my impression was that the election was fair.

Nour asked about my nationality, and then he blamed the United States for El-Balyana's poverty. "We've had Egyptian sovereignty for seven thousand years," he said. "You feel angry with us because of our civilization!"

He sat with his back to the Nile, surrounded by two dozen elders. A ripple of laughter ran through the group. Nour told me that America had created Daesh, the Islamic State. "I hope that God sends you earthquakes and volcanoes!"

The men laughed again, and Nour told a story about a female American diplomat who supposedly had used sex to manipulate Saddam Hussein. In Egypt, I occasionally found myself in a situation where a man played to his companions by mocking the foreigner, and there was a bullying, locker-room dynamic. This quality seemed to characterize many of the worst aspects of Egyptian politics—pride, shame, a refusal to compromise, periodic spasms of violence—and sometimes I wondered how much dysfunction could be attributed to the unrelenting maleness of power in Egypt. Many public figures seemed likely to benefit from even the occasional sound of a woman's voice saying: Maybe you should stop talking now.

"A woman with beautiful legs!" Nour said. He was still describing the female diplomat. "When Saddam talked to her,

she took off her skirt, and she gave him the green light!" The men laughed, and Nour ranted about Americans for a while. Finally, I asked if he opposed Egypt's acceptance of the roughly one and a half billion dollars of annual aid from the United States.

"That number is weak!" he said. "It's not suitable for Egypt."

I asked what a suitable figure might be.

"Not less than eight billion dollars," he said proudly.

**T**HE MOST WELCOMING *dawar* belonged to Yusuf, who seemed like the only natural politician I met. Many Christians voted for him—they made up about ten per cent of the local population, but most candidates basically ignored them, because they were outside the tribal system. After the polls closed, I waited in Yusuf's *dawar*, where elders tried to keep track of preliminary results. They did this by scribbling numbers chaotically onto scrap paper—it struck me that a couple of computer-savvy kids could have figured out a system. But all the young supporters waited outside, holding big wooden staves. These are used in a traditional dance called the *tahtib*, which would be performed if the candidate won. Given the history of election fights in Upper Egypt, it seemed like a terrible idea to have mobs of young men holding sticks while waiting for the results.

All the candidates were at the election commission's headquarters, observing the count. Around midnight, somebody at Rafat's *dawar* called to tell me that supporters were celebrating with gunfire. Soon after that, a young man burst into Yusuf's headquarters and shouted, "Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!" Everybody ran outside. Standing beside the door, I was joined by a cotton farmer in his sixties, who reached into his galabia, pulled out a 9-millimetre Helwan pistol, and fired four rounds into the sky. In the crowded street, men began waving sticks while others shot rifles and shotguns. A few minutes later, another mob appeared, holding sticks and guns and chanting Nour Abu Steit's name. The same thing was happening at Mahmoud's camp: in different corners of El-Balyana, the supporters of all four candidates claimed victory.

Al Hayah, a Cairo television station, announced that Yusuf and Nour were the winners, and the celebrations intensified. But soon there were rumors that the announcement was wrong, and then, at two o'clock in the morning, an official statement finally came: the Abu'l Khair cousins had taken both seats.

At Yusuf's *dawar*, one of the elders stormed into the street, furious about the premature celebration. "Have you heard the real results?" he shouted in a mocking tone. More than two hundred young men stood there, still clutching their sticks and guns.

**T**HE OVER-ALL WINNER was Mahmoud, and fewer than five hundred votes separated the other three candidates. Late that evening, I visited Mahmoud's home, where the sound of ululating rang out—on the upper floors, unseen women were celebrating.

In interviews, Mahmoud had always been guarded, and I often wondered what lessons his generation would take from the events of the past five years. Activists claim that young Egyptians now realize their power, having witnessed two Presidents being removed after protests. But it seems just as likely that this generation will conclude that such political activity changes nothing important. In Mahmoud's *dawar*, I asked the former Salafi if there should be more space for political Islam, but he dodged the question. ("We have new



matters now.") His response was similar when I mentioned the Muslim Brotherhood. ("I don't want to talk about old things.") He told me that he liked the current President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has led the crackdown against the Islamists. ("He's respectful.")

Nationwide, the biggest victor was a coalition called For the Love of Egypt, which swept all hundred and twenty list seats. It was led by a former Army general named Sameh Seif El-Yazal,

who hoped to build a majority in the five-hundred-and-sixty-eight-member parliament. But the lack of strong parties insured a degree of chaos. In January, the parliament rejected a civil-service law that had been supported by Sisi, who wanted to reduce the bureaucracy. Clearly, this wasn't just a rubber-stamp parliament, but members were also unlikely to organize any kind of coherent opposition. In November, when I asked El-Yazal if he and Sisi had any significant differences of opinion, he said, "So far, for seventeen months now, I haven't seen a single mistake that he's made."

**I**N FRONT OF Yusuf's *dawar*, after the announcement, everybody stood in shock for a few minutes, and then the candidate appeared. "You should go home," Yusuf said, gesturing to the mob of young men holding sticks. "It's better than if a crime had happened."

A middle-aged man approached him, looking distraught. "By God, did you have an accident?" Yusuf said. He laughed and kissed the man on both cheeks. "Go to sleep. Tomorrow we'll start a new life."

For ten minutes, he talked gently, until the street was clear. Then he took a seat at the back of the *dawar*. Once he was alone, his face transformed—he looked unspeakably sad. I sat nearby with my translator, and nobody said anything. All the elders had left; the room was silent. It was the emptiest *dawar* I'd ever seen.

After a while, I said something about better luck next time.

"There's no next time," Yusuf said. "It's ended for me, politically."

He said that he wanted to focus on farming for a while. Of the election, he said, "It wasn't about services or love. If it had been, I would have won." He believed that the Abu'l Khair cousins had had an overwhelming financial advantage.

While we were talking, a young boy came and sat nearby, his eyes full of tears. Yusuf paused to comfort him on the way out, and I asked if he was one of his sons.

"No," Yusuf said, and laughed lightly at this—his last act as a politician. He said, "I've never seen that boy before in my life." ♦

## LEARN DIFFERENT

*Silicon Valley disrupts education.*

BY REBECCA MEAD

**S**EEN FROM THE outside, AltSchool Brooklyn, a private school that opened in Brooklyn Heights last fall, does not look like a traditional educational establishment. There is no playground attached, no crossing guard at the street corner, and no crowd of children blocking the sidewalk in the morning. The school is one floor up, in a commercial building overlooking Montague Street. On the building's exterior is a logo: a light-blue square, with rounded corners, bearing the word "ALT." It looks like an iPhone app awaiting the tap of a colossal finger.

Inside, the space has been partitioned with dividers creating several classrooms. The décor evokes an IKEA showroom: low-slung couches, beanbags, clusters of tables, and wooden chairs in progressively smaller sizes, like those belonging to Goldilocks's three bears. There is no principal's office and no principal. Like the five other AltSchools that have opened in the past three years—the rest are in the Bay Area—the school is run by teachers, one of whom serves as the head of the school. There is no school secretary: many administrative matters are handled at AltSchool's headquarters, in the SOMA district of San Francisco. There aren't even many children. Every AltSchool is a "micro-school." In Brooklyn Heights, there are thirty-five students, ranging from pre-kindergarten to third grade. Only a few dozen more children will be added as the school matures. AltSchool's ambition, however, is huge. Five more schools are scheduled to open by the end of 2017, in San Francisco, Manhattan, and Chicago, and the goal is to expand into other parts of the country, offering a highly tailored education that uses technology to target each student's "needs and passions." Tuition is about thirty thousand dollars a year.

In December, I visited a classroom for half a dozen pre-kindergartners. Sev-

eral children were playing "restaurant," and one girl sat in a chair, her arms outstretched as if holding a steering wheel: she was delivering food orders. "I'm taking a shortcut," she announced. A teacher sitting on the floor told her, "That's a good word—you used it correctly." Then she took out her phone and recorded a video of the moment.

Another teacher and a student were looking at a tablet computer that displayed an image of a pink jellyfish. The girl had been drawing her own jellyfish with a violet crayon. "Let's see if we can learn a name of a new jellyfish," the teacher said. "Which one do you want to learn more about?" She touched the screen, and another jellyfish appeared—a feathery white one. "This is a...*hippopotamus*?" the teacher read, stumbling over the name. "I wonder if this one glows in the dark." The girl said, "Do you have another pink one?"

Students at AltSchool are issued a tablet in pre-K and switch to a laptop in later years. (For now, AltSchool ends at the equivalent of eighth grade.) When I visited a mixed classroom for second and third graders, most of the children were sunk into their laptops. All were engaged in bespoke activities that had been assigned to them through a "playlist"—software that displays a series of digital "cards" containing instructions for a task to be completed. Sometimes it was an online task. Two children were doing keyboarding drills on a typing Web site. Their results would be uploaded for a teacher's assessment and added to the student's online Learning Progression—software developed by AltSchool which captures, in minute detail, a student's progress.

The curriculum is roughly aligned with the Common Core, the government standards that establish topics which students should master by the end of each grade. But AltSchool's ethos is fundamentally opposed to the para-

digm of standardization that has dominated public education in recent decades, and reflects a growing shift in emphasis among theorists toward "personalized learning." This approach acknowledges and adapts to the differences among students: their abilities, their interests, their cultural backgrounds.

A girl in the class was completing an offline task—reading a book about polar bears. A boy lay on his stomach on the carpeted floor, headphones on, using a Web site called BrainPOP to learn how to calculate the perimeters of basic shapes. "Two out of five!" he shouted at one point, as oblivious of those around him as a subway rider wearing earbuds and singing along to Drake.

Not all the activities were solitary. Two girls sat together, laptops before them, using Google Images to scroll through pictures of seals for a social-studies assignment; occasionally, they paused to compare notes. Every so often, a student spoke with the teacher, a young woman in jeans and a loose top, her iPhone tucked under her thigh as she sat on the carpet. One girl had been using her laptop to research castles—an area of sustained interest. She and the teacher discussed princesses and castles, and whether they always went together. "That's a good question," the teacher said, and then asked, "Does America have princesses?"

A girl working nearby said, "Yes—my mom told me there was a princess and she died because of the paparazzi."

"My mom says that every castle has got a torture place," the girl who was studying castles said.

"What is a castle?—that was your starting question today," the teacher said. After the girl wrote a response, on paper, the teacher snapped a photograph of the page, in order to upload it to the girl's playlist card.

She might also send it to a parent's phone, using AltSchool Stream, an app



*AltSchool embeds fish-eye lenses in the walls of its classrooms, capturing every word, action, and interaction, for potential analysis.*

that enables instant communication between home and school. Meanwhile, above the students' heads, a network of white audio recorders hung from the ceiling, and fish-eye lenses were embedded in the walls. The goal of this surveillance system, AltVideo, is to capture every word, action, and interaction, for potential analysis.

"Does every castle have torture?" the teacher said, her voice sounding sunny, if a bit distracted. "That's a good starting question for tomorrow."

**M**AX VENTILLA, ALTSCHOOL's thirty-five-year-old founder, is a native New Yorker who attended Buckley, on the Upper East Side, and proceeded to Andover, the New England prep school. He went to Yale, where he majored in math and physics, and then earned an M.B.A. Ventilla worked briefly for Google, then launched a startup, Aardvark, which developed a tool for "social search"—the ability to direct a question to a targeted group of people. In 2010, he sold the company to Google, reportedly for fifty million dollars. Ventilla re-

joined Google as a group product manager, and eventually became responsible for creating a "unity of experience" across the company's products—insuring that, say, a user's search results are informed by her YouTube browsing history. When Ventilla quit Google to start AltSchool, in the spring of 2013, he had no experience as a teacher or an educational administrator. But he did have extensive knowledge of networks, and he understood the kinds of insights that can be gleaned from big data.

The first AltSchool opened that September, in the Dogpatch neighborhood of San Francisco. The idea grew out of the search that Ventilla and his wife, Jenny Stefanotti, a former Google executive, conducted to find a preschool for their daughter, who is now four. (They also have a two-year-old son.) "It was a startlingly miserable experience," he told me. "You are thrown into this high-stakes world of trying to get your two-year-old into a school, and all the places that are desirable have a hundred times more people applying than they admit, and if you don't pick your preschool right your child

will be penniless and alone at thirty. And there is, absurdly, a little bit of truth to that." While visiting schools, Ventilla was struck by how little education had changed since he began school. "A three-year-old today isn't that different," he told me. But, largely because of technology, "a thirteen-year-old is *really* different."

The more Ventilla thought about education, the more he thought that he could bring about change—and not just for his own children. Instead of starting a "one-off school," he would create an educational "ecosystem" that was unusually responsive to the interests of children, feeding them assignments tied to subjects they cared about. Ventilla's vision fit the prevailing ethos of middle-class child rearing, in which offspring are urged to find their enthusiasms and pursue them into rewarding nonconformity.

Ventilla also wanted students to focus on developing skills that would be useful in the workplace of the future, rather than forcing them to acquire knowledge deemed important by historical precedent. "Kids should be spending less time practicing calculating by hand today than fifty years ago, because today everyone walks around with a calculator," Ventilla told me. "That doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to do math—I shouldn't have to whip out my phone to figure out if someone gave me the correct change. But you should shift the emphasis to what is relatively easier, or what is relatively more important." Ventilla loves languages—his parents are Hungarian, and he grew up bilingual before studying French and Latin in school. He later learned some Persian, so that he could understand what a girlfriend's family was saying about him at the dinner table. But he's not certain that his daughter should devote similar energy to language acquisition. "If the reason you are having your child learn a foreign language is so that they can communicate with someone in a different language twenty years from now—well, the relative value of that is changed, surely, by the fact that everyone is going to be walking around with live-translation apps," he said.

I recently toured the Dogpatch facility, which is situated in a former industrial building near the waterfront. "It was basically put together with spit and toilet paper," Carolyn Wilson, one of



*"You call this guacamole?"*

AltSchool's founding teachers, who is now the company's director of education, told me. Today, the company employs more than a hundred and fifty people, split evenly among educators, technologists, and operations managers. This rapid growth has been funded by a hundred and ten million dollars in venture capital—and twenty million in venture debt—that has been raised over the past two years, among the largest investments ever made in education technology. AltSchool's capital comes from some of Silicon Valley's top investors, including the Founders Fund, Andreessen Horowitz, and John Doerr. Last year, the philanthropic Silicon Valley Community Foundation invested fifteen million dollars in AltSchool, through a fund financed by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan. (Currently, tuition fees cover most of the expenses of running the schools, including teacher salaries; the investment money helps cover technologists' salaries, real-estate costs, and other expenditures related to the company's growth.) None of these backers want merely to own part of a chain of boutique micro-schools. Rather, they hope that AltSchool will help "reinvent" American education: first, by innovating in its micro-schools; next, by providing software to educators who want to start up their own schools; and, finally, by offering its software for use in public schools across the nation, a goal that the company hopes to achieve in three to five years.

Silicon Valley entrepreneurs are convinced that the flexibility and innovation of the tech sphere can be productively and profitably applied to the education sector, which is perceived as sclerotic. Sal Khan, who in 2005 founded Khan Academy, the popular online math-tutorial platform, says, "Most of the people who end up doing well in Silicon Valley did very well academically, but they often have a very strong viewpoint about how it could have been better."

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has poured billions of dollars into education grants, including for research on digital tools and personalized learning. Laurene Powell Jobs, the widow of Steve Jobs, has made education a priority for her charitable organization, the Emerson Collective, pledging fifty mil-

lion dollars to fund innovation in high-school education. (The Emerson Collective is an investor in AltSchool.) Mark Zuckerberg made a much publicized investment of a hundred million dollars in the public schools of Newark, although, as the journalist Dale Russakoff has chronicled, much of it was wasted. Facebook has been more successful in offering coding assistance to Summit, a chain of charter schools in the Palo Alto area; this year, Summit's free software, called the Personalized Learning Plan, has been introduced in nineteen pilot schools nationwide.

AltSchool is what Silicon Valley people call a "full-stack" company, meaning that it is not just concerned with software. Most education-technology start-ups do not operate any schools. (Khan Academy has a single school, in Mountain View, but expanding its bricks-and-mortar operation is not a priority for the company.) Companies that are a hybrid of the virtual and the actual, like Uber or Airbnb or AltSchool, are particularly in vogue among Silicon Valley investors.

"Facebook started as, essentially, a bulletin board for Harvard students," Ventilla told me. "Uber started as a private chauffeur that Garrett"—Garrett Camp, Uber's founder—"hired and rode around with. This is a relatively common occurrence. You start in a very narrow way that you control and that really represents a kind of fundamentally different approach. And then you iterate."

**T**WO YEARS AGO, AltSchool Fort Mason opened in the Marina District of San Francisco, on a commercial strip next to a Starbucks. When I stopped by, in December, children in the lower grades were being entertained by a startlingly tall blond woman dressed in a very short dress of Russian folk design. She was impersonating Snegurochka, the Snow Maiden, who visits children on New Year's Eve. (It turned out that she was a student's mother.) Upstairs in the middle school, the class was engaged in a complex simulation of a society that is undergoing a financial crisis and is ruled by a pair of dictators. (The two teachers played the tyrants.) This group project, which combined math and civ-

ics, was part of a broader effort to study different forms of government and to learn how an economy works.

The classroom resembled a tech employee's studio apartment: couches, bookcases, a flat-screen TV, a kitchen area. Bowls on the counter were filled with apple slices and blue corn chips. Each student was using a Chromebook. The lead teacher, Christie Seyfert, was

an energetic young woman with green hair, but the students weren't watching her. They were looking at her image on the TV screen, where her face and voice had been distorted to signal her role as dictator. In an earlier session, the students had drawn lots to determine



their jobs in the simulated society. Some were sales supervisors, others secretaries; one boy was the C.E.O. of an oil company. Their task that day was to research their salaries online and figure out what their tax bracket should be, by consulting a list that was posted on a wall. They were using real-world data, but to liven up the proceedings their income would be paid in units of POOO (an acronym for People's Organization of Opportunity).

After Seyfert's introduction, the students formed small groups. Several boys crowded around a couch, Googling salaries. Another group excitedly discussed the arbitrariness of the job assignments and the dictator's instructions. "I'm going to form a union!" a girl cried. Seyfert was pleased by the ferment.

Seyfert, who is twenty-eight, started her career with Teach for America, working among low-income students in San Jose. "I started out thinking there was a way to close the achievement gap," she told me. "It became clear to me, teaching in those neighborhoods, that by looking for standards to pull everyone up we are forgetting to address what the individual needs. We are forgetting to think about how kids learn and what they need to be successful in life."

In San Jose, students' scores on annual state tests were made available only after the end of the school year. At AltSchool, Seyfert could keep tabs on her students' daily, if not hourly, progress. Every task card on a student's playlist is tagged to denote not just academic skills,



like math and literacy, but also social and emotional skills.

Seyfert pulled up the Learning Progression spreadsheet of one of her students, a seventh grader. Grades from kindergarten to eighth grade were denoted on the X axis, and various subject areas on the Y axis. Areas of completed study—sixth-grade math, for example—were indicated by cells filled in with green. Areas the student was still working on—seventh-grade science, for instance—were colored orange. In English, he was working well ahead of his expected grade level. Seyfert could click on each subject area to get more precise information about his progress. The effect was rather like opening an online report from a credit-card company that can show expenditures by category—Shopping, Travel—as well as specific purchases. She could see how many articles the student had read on Newsela, a site that provides Associated Press articles edited for different reading levels. She could click to see the student's scores on the quizzes that accompanied each article, and then go into the article itself to read his annotations and marginal notes.

Here and there a solitary orange cell

indicated an area that the student had not yet mastered. A student might have been sick the week that his fifth-grade class consolidated its knowledge of fractions and might not quite have grasped the principle. "If I notice he is really scoring low on a standard, I can go and look at the cards that assess that standard and see where the breakdown is happening," Seyfert explained.

At the same time, educators at AltSchool are discussing whether children really need to attain certain skills at particular stages of their educational development, as the Common Core implies. Seyfert thinks that it might be more useful to think of learning not as linear but as scrambled, like a torrent file on a computer: "You can imagine all the things you need to learn, and you could learn it all out of order so long as you can zip it up at the end, and you are good to go."

Like other AltSchool teachers, Seyfert was drawn to the startup because of its ambition to make systemic change. Two or three times a week, she told me, she gives colleagues feedback about the school's digital tools. The Learner Profile, Stream app, and other tools are only about a year old, and AltSchool's personalization still requires considerable

human intervention. Software is updated every day. Carolyn Wilson, AltSchool's director of education, told me, "We encourage staff members to express their pain points, step up with their ideas, take a risk, fail forward, and fail fast, because we know we are going to iterate quickly. Other schools tend to move in geologic time." (Ventilla may question the utility of foreign-language acquisition, but fluency in the jargon of Silicon Valley—English 2.0—is required at AltSchool.)

Ventilla told me that these tools were central to a revised conception of what a teacher might be: "We are really shifting the role of an educator to someone who is more of a data-enabled detective." He defined a traditional teacher as an "artisanal lesson planner on one hand and disciplinary babysitter on the other hand." Educators are stakeholders in AltSchool's eventual success: equity has been offered to all full-time teachers.

In Seyfert's classroom, I spoke with Otto Craddock, the seventh grader whose Learning Progression I had glimpsed. He had been researching the job that he held in the simulation: secretary. His parents, an advertising consultant and an executive at BlackRock, had moved him from a well-regarded private school. Gorse Jeffries, his mother, told me that he had seemed listless. Otto said, "At my old school, they were, like, 'O.K., you want to do architecture? Maybe in college you can do architecture.' Here some people selected architecture, and we did a whole unit on architecture, and we built models and projects."

The previous day, Otto said, a guest teacher had come in to lead several students in a 3-D-modelling project, using a Web site called Tinkercad. "We built little models online—some people built phone cases, or little towers, or yo-yos," Otto said. "I built a toilet, because I thought it would be fun. It has lots of different components—you have the base, you have the seat, you have the back." He clicked to the site and pulled up his model. "I was looking around at pictures of toilets online," he said. "I think I want to make it a bit more shaped for your back. I also want really sanitary toilets. And I want to make it really comfy. I'm quite bony, and I'm small, and if they don't have a cushion they hurt." Eventually, Otto said, he planned

to 3-D print his prototype: a model toilet, fashioned to his personal specifications and preferences.

ONE AFTERNOON IN December, two dozen AltSchool technologists gathered in a conference room at the company's headquarters for a "hackathon"—a concentrated session of brainstorming and coding. Some participants had laptops in front of them; others had curry or salad from the company kitchen. All but a few were male, and nobody looked older than forty.

The point of the hackathon was to sketch out in code potential solutions to "robot tasks"—routine aspects of a teacher's job that don't require teaching skills. Kimberly Johnson, the head of product success and training, addressed the team. "Basically, what we have told teachers is we have hired you for your creative teacher brains, and anytime you are doing something that doesn't require your creative teacher brain that a computer could be doing as well as or better than you, then a computer should do it," Johnson said.

Since the previous hackathon, three months earlier, teachers at AltSchool had filed more than a hundred digital "tickets" to Johnson, indicating how AltSchool software might be improved. Some teachers had asked for a more streamlined way to input data. Johnson acknowledged, "It is a lot of work to go into each card and click the learning objective and click the score and click 'save.' It's just four or five clicks, but it adds up." The teachers also wanted to enter assessment scores to groups of kids at once. "If you say, I want to give all of these kids threes, and all of these kids fours, there must be an easy way to do that," Johnson said. "I don't know what it would look like, but you could probably hack something together."

Teachers also wanted faster access to the video recordings of their classrooms, to better evaluate students' breakthrough moments, or to see what was going wrong when the classroom grew disorderly. Currently, Johnson said, teachers were using Slack, the group-messaging app, to alert her when there was a moment in the classroom that they wished to review. She'd watch the footage in order to find the right clip to bookmark, then send a link to the teacher through e-mail. This process

could take days. "That would be a cool thing to automate," she said.

Technologists have been trying to transform the classroom for decades. In the late seventies, Seymour Papert, a pioneer of artificial intelligence at M.I.T., contended that children's minds might be profoundly enriched by coding. A child who learns to program "both acquires a sense of mastery over a piece of the most modern and powerful technology and establishes an intimate contact with some of the deepest ideas from science, from mathematics, and from the art of intellectual model building," Papert wrote in his book, "Mindstorms," which was published in 1980.

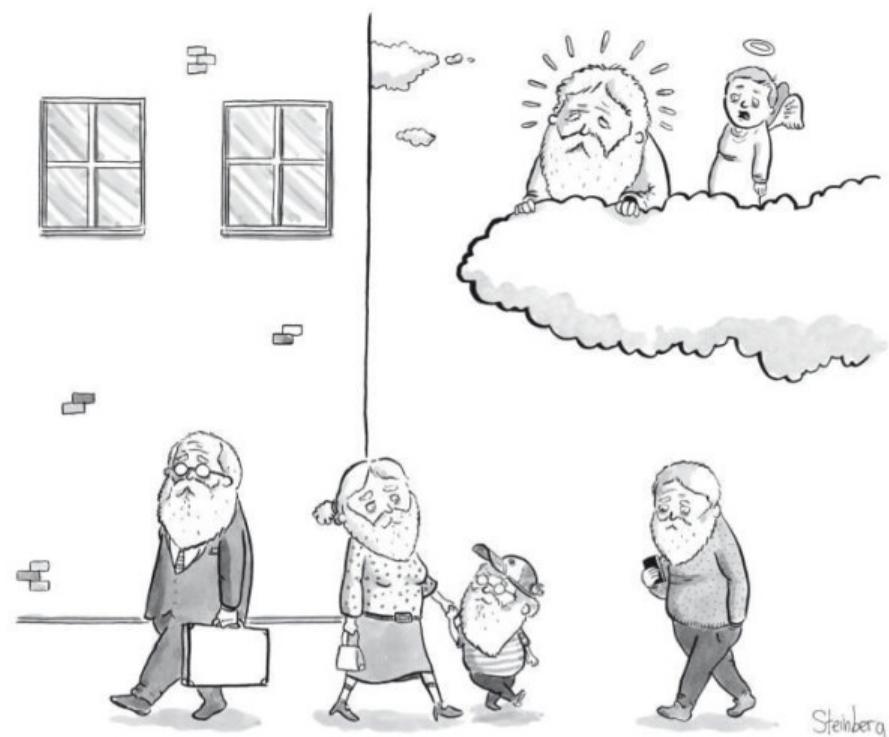
Coding has become a familiar part of the curriculum, but computers are being used more and more for customized instruction. Jose Ferreira, the founder and C.E.O. of Knewton, an adaptive-learning platform that has raised more than a hundred million dollars in venture funding, recently compared his product to "a robot tutor in the sky that can semi-read your mind and figure out what your strengths and weaknesses are, down to the percentile."

Studies of the effectiveness of online learning programs suggest that greater humility is in order. A 2010 meta-analysis commissioned by the Department of

Education concluded that students whose teachers combined digital and face-to-face learning did somewhat better than students who were not exposed to digital tools, but there was a major caveat: the teachers who added digital tools were judged to be more effective educators in general.

In 2012, Teach to One, a program that incorporates software to guide middle-school students through a math curriculum, was adopted at seven schools nationwide, including some in New York City. After a year, results were mixed: one school made gains far better than the national average, one did far worse, and the remaining five were close to the national average. In the second year, the program was expanded, and the results were better: eleven schools made higher-than-average gains, two made gains significantly lower than the national average, and two performed at par. A report commissioned by Teach to One stressed that improved scores could not be attributed entirely to the software. Joel Rose, the co-founder of New Classrooms, the company that developed Teach to One, likes to use an alarming metaphor popular among Silicon Valley innovators: "You've got to build the plane while you're flying."

So far, Teach to One is limited to



*"Maybe a little less in your own image."*

math. Machines have become quite good at measuring the acquisition of arithmetical operations, but they are much less good at quantifying such skills as creativity or flexibility—let alone measuring less easily definable aspects of a humanistic education, such as literary appreciation or artistic sensibility or the development of empathy. A digital reading platform that embeds interactive vocabulary assessments and comprehension tests in literary texts may guide young readers to “just right” books, and may give teachers insight into their students’ reading stamina and their progression from one “Lexile level”—a measure of literacy—to another. It may even achieve the elusive goal of encouraging reluctant readers to become enthusiastic ones. The creators of one literacy tool, LightSail, report that many kids, especially boys, treat the embedded assessments as a competitive game, fist-pumping when they get a vocabulary word right. But, at least for now, no literacy tool can tell whether a reader laughed at “The Mouse and the Motorcycle” or wept over “The Fault in Our Stars.” Nor can an app weigh the value of those moments when a reader looks up from the digital page and stares into space. To a computer measuring keystrokes, a student zoning out because he’s bored is indistinguishable from one who is moved by her book to imagine a world of her own.

Even ed-tech advocates have warned against an overzealous embrace of the digital and the measurable. Jennifer Carolan, a former teacher who is now an investor at Reach Capital, recently wrote on her blog, “With all of the investment hype and entrepreneurial frenzy, I worry that some might view personalization as yet another silver bullet for education.” There have already been several high-profile ed-tech failures. News Corp developed Amplify, an educational-software division, and appointed Joel Klein, the former New York schools chancellor, as its head, only to spin it off this fall after school districts declined to buy into it.

Unlike Amplify, AltSchool generates revenue by charging tuition. And in cities like San Francisco and New York it could prove a popular option for the many families who opt out of the public system. About a quarter of AltSchool students receive financial aid. “To pro-

## FUSION

When we recognize we “think again” without knowing what or if we thought before.

I confuse copper  
with brass.

To recognize is almost  
always a pleasure;  
perhaps it is pleasure itself.

I confuse Melissa  
with Melissa.

To recognize is not  
only to give something a name  
but to give it the very name  
that was waiting for it

somewhere

as if thing and name had been  
sad without each other.

vide students with a school experience that prepares them for the future, we need classrooms that are representative of the diversity in our country,” Ventilla says. AltSchool’s technological schemes, however, may be very hard to implement in less affluent public school districts. A child who doesn’t have wireless Internet access at home can’t do homework on a tablet, even if her school provides one.

Some education advocates are wary about potential privacy violations that might result from data collection on the scale intended by AltSchool, particularly given that AltSchool is a for-profit company. (Most independent schools are not-for-profit institutions.) These concerns could complicate the adoption of AltSchool software by public school systems. Ventilla says that there is no intention to use AltSchool data for commercial purposes, and that AltSchool can gather data in a way that will respect a student’s anonymity. Only salient moments in the classroom videos are saved, he says, and most are not even stored. “I would never want to record all the things a kid says and keep them around,” he said. But he added that looking at vocabulary-acquisition patterns

in aggregate could provide teachers with valuable information that will help them teach each individual more effectively. “The collection of any kind of data is not free,” Ventilla acknowledged. “But the alternative is the incredibly invasive, inaccurate standardized-testing regimen that we have now, which comes at a lot of cost, psychic and otherwise, and doesn’t provide nearly the amount of benefit that we want.”

Daniel Willingham, an education scholar at the University of Virginia, told me that adopting technology in schools can be maddeningly inefficient. “The most common thing I hear is that when you adopt technology you have to write twice the lesson plans,” he told me. “You have the one you use with the technology, and you have the backup one you use when the technology doesn’t work that day.” Willingham also notes that the most crucial thing about educational software isn’t the code that assesses student performance; it’s the worthiness of the readings and the clarity of the math questions being presented on-screen. “People are very focussed on the algorithm,” he said. “But equally important is the quality of the materials.”

That's a woman  
in an arctic-fox costume  
singing, "Don't you worry  
'bout a thing,  
baby."

I confuse worry with

\*

Darkness in the shape  
of leaves  
flows over a building;  
  
black ellipses  
on the bay  
  
slipping  
and falling into place

—Rae Armantrout

The gap between AltSchool's ambitions for technology and the reality of the classroom was painfully obvious the morning that I spent in the Brooklyn school. One kindergartner grew increasingly frustrated with his tablet as he tried to take a photograph of interlocking cubes that he had snapped into a strip of ten. (He was supposed to upload the image to his playlist.) He shook the unresponsive tablet, then stabbed repeatedly at the screen, like an exhausted passenger in a cab after an overnight flight, unable to quell the Taxi TV.

Even when AltSchool's methods worked as intended, there were sometimes questionable results. The two girls whom I watched searching for seals on Google Images found plenty of suitable photographs. But the same search term called up a news photo of the corpse of a porpoise, its blood blossoming in the water after being rent almost in half by a seal attack. It also called up an image in which the head of Seal, the singer, had been Photoshopped onto a sea lion's body—an object of much fascination to the students. To the extent that this exercise was preparing them for the workplace of the future, it was also dispir-

itingly familiar from the workplace of the present, where the rabbit holes of the Internet offer perpetual temptation.

UNDER ARNE DUNCAN, who resigned as Secretary of Education in 2015 after six years in the post, U.S. schools deployed an ever-expanding regimen of standardized tests, and Common Core was widely adopted. The goal was to improve the assessment of student learning and teacher performance through the collection of data and the use of shared standards. But toward the end of his tenure Duncan acknowledged that the pressures of high-stakes testing had deformed classroom practices, to the detriment of students and teachers alike. His resignation may mark the beginning of the end of thirty years of standards-based education reform.

Meanwhile, there is a rise in interest among parents and educators about habits of success. Qualities like "grit" and "resilience," and how to cultivate them, are much discussed in contemporary educational theory, and teachers increasingly speak of "meeting children" where their abilities and interests lie. Among educational theorists, one

of the buzzwords is "blended learning"—in which students receive "content" from a combination of classroom lectures and software.

AltSchool families might be described as early adopters of this new paradigm. Ventilla is wary of the characterization. "No one who likes gadgets chooses to send a kid to a school because it's new—it is such a meaningful, high-intensity purchase," he told me. Still, Don MacAskill, a parent at AltSchool Palo Alto, told me, "We are very comfortable with our kids being guinea pigs. I do buy into the AltSchool mission. I believe education needs to change, not just in our little micro-school here but all over the world. We are raising a generation that will have the sum of human knowledge at their fingertips, for every minute of their life, so clearly education needs to change to accommodate that."

I met MacAskill and several other parents one day after school. He and his wife, Liz, were wearing sweatshirts bearing the logo of SmugMug, a photo-sharing startup. MacAskill is its co-founder and "chief geek." He knew Ventilla from tech circles, and recalls, "We ran into each other a couple of years ago, and he said, 'I'm doing this great thing to revolutionize education.' I said, 'Wow, that sounds like a big hard job, dude. Good luck—I can't wait to watch.' And then our kids started to grow up." The three MacAskill children—Leia, named for the princess; Logan, named for the X-Men character; and Audrey, named for Hepburn—had been in public schools, but MacAskill said, "Once our twins got into third grade, some of the issues around non-personalized learning really sort of kicked in."

There had been some bumpy moments for the Palo Alto school, which opened last fall. One family left after concluding that there wasn't enough homework. Other parents wanted to know the curriculum in advance—an impossible demand in a school dedicated to following children's interests. A look around the classrooms confirmed that for some children the ability to follow their own passions reaped rich dividends. I observed the kindergarten-and-first-grade classroom during afternoon "choice time," and saw two children separately involved in complicated

long-term projects. A seven-year-old boy with an avid interest in American history had built a dining-table-sized model of Fort Sumter out of cardboard—he was painting black-splotch windows on its perimeter. He had also composed a storybook about Paul Revere, which was vibrantly written, if impressionistically spelled. Another seven-year-old boy had undertaken a physics experiment, building two styles of catapult out of tongue depressors and tape. He was measuring their power with the help of a yardstick affixed to the wall, and recording the data in a notebook. The AltSchool environment—and an inspiring young teacher named Paul France—had liberated these children's individual creativity and intellectual curiosity in just the way that the parents of a potential Elon Musk might hope.

The boys' classmates, however, had made less demanding use of their choice time, and this had apparently allowed the teaching staff to provide the necessary support for the more ambitious projects. Four boys were seated on the floor making primitive catapults with Jenga blocks. Half a dozen girls had chosen "art creation," and were sitting around a table affixing stickers to paper and chatting. One girl had opted to work in clay. But no students had chosen to engage in dramatic play, or to work at the light table, or to do jigsaw puzzles—options that were displayed on a wall chart. The remaining eight children—six boys

and two girls—had selected "tablet time." They were sitting around a table, each with headphones on, expertly swiping and clicking their way through word or number games. Their quiet immersion would be recognizable to any parent who has ever bought herself a moment's peace from the demands of interacting with her child by opening Angry Birds on her phone.

**T**EACH THESE BOYS and girls nothing but Facts," Thomas Gradgrind, the rigid schoolteacher in Charles Dickens's "Hard Times," declares. "Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." Dickens's novel was a satire of the philosophy of utilitarianism as it was applied to education: the idea that working-class children needed to know enough to work in factories and nothing more.

Personalized education promises an escape from the more recent Gradgrindian practice of standardized tests. In a world of personalized learning, the argument goes, every child's particular genius will be permitted to shine. But AltSchool's philosophy of education is also essentially utilitarian, even as it celebrates the individuality, autonomy, and creativity of its students. It holds that children should be prepared for the workplace of the future—and that the workplace of the future will demand individuality, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking.

AltSchool's perspective does not nec-

essarily require abandoning texts that have long been considered central to a humanist education, but it does mean approaching them anew. One middle-school class undertook a lengthy study of the *Iliad* by focussing on the theme of "rage" and designing a spreadsheet that logged instances of it. They then used data-visualization techniques to show their findings, and wrote persuasive essays based on their results. Afterward, their teacher, James Earle, wrote, "Analyzing a piece of literature this way turns the work into a piece of robust data that can be understood quantitatively, in addition to allowing a qualitative reading." The workplace of the future, according to AltSchool's premise, will look a lot like some workplaces in the present—places like Google and Facebook, where Gradgrind's faith in facts is matched by faith in the revelatory power of data.

Last spring, AltSchool hired Bharat Mediratta, a ten-year Google veteran, as chief technology officer. Mediratta had been running part of the search infrastructure that powered Google's home page. I met with him in an AltSchool office in San Francisco, and he told me, "When I joined Google, no one wanted to work on this project—it was literally the world's largest Web app, but it was mostly me doing infrastructure. And when I left I had built a team of two hundred to two hundred and fifty people."

Joining Mediratta was Rajiv Bhatia, AltSchool's "vice-president of product"—overseeing its software development. He previously worked at Zynga, the company behind Farmville and other online games. "I feel a little bit better about working on something a little bit more noble," he said. "Selling virtual sheep was fun, and getting better at it was great, and I do feel the principles and constructs of reacting to what your users need, and what the market is asking you to do, is useful here." Mediratta, too, was motivated to join AltSchool by the opportunity to have greater social impact. "For us to complete our mission, we need to get to the fifty million kids in public school," he said. So far, AltSchool's data pool was small, and not particularly "actionable." But, Mediratta went on, "Raj and I both come from big-data backgrounds. We have this deep belief that, as we start pulling in data,

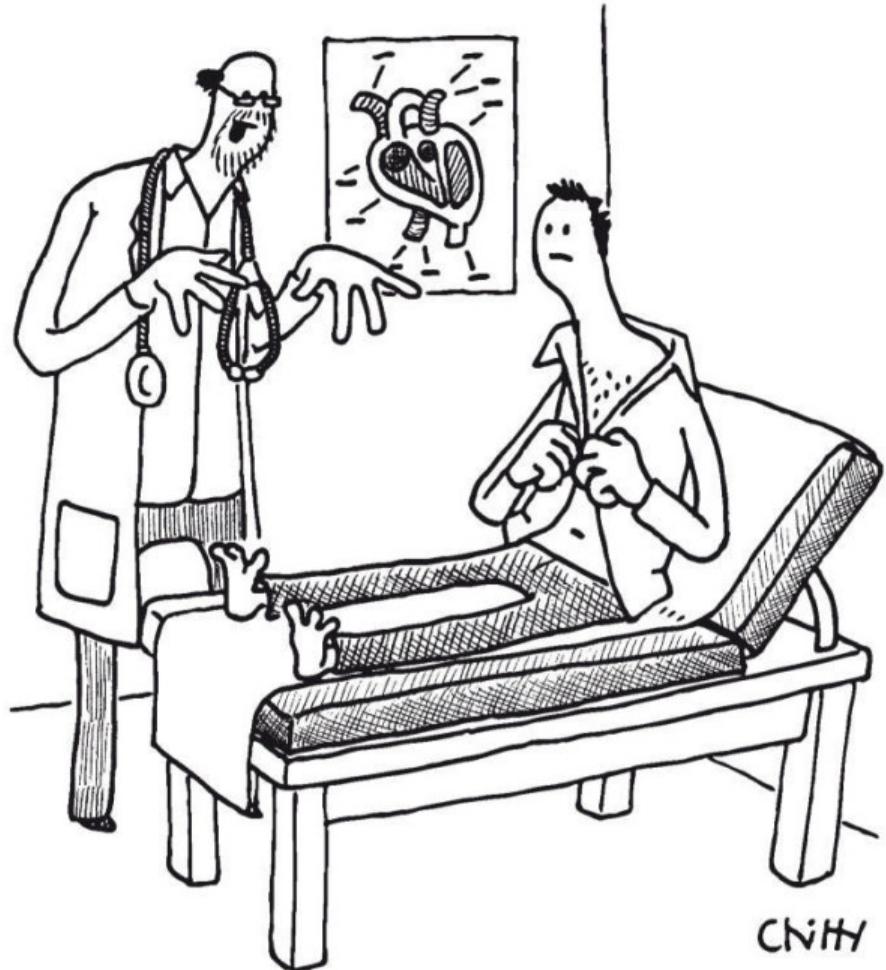


we will be able to find ways to help teachers and improve the system."

Both men were particularly excited about the data that might be gathered through AltVideo. "It allows the teacher to be what I like to call 'retroactively omniscient,'" Mediratta said. He noted that a teacher could unobtrusively observe a student who had taken a long time completing an assignment and determine if he had been struggling or goofing off. The video also allows the AltSchool real-estate team to discern how to improve the layout of its schools. Bhatia clicked on his laptop to show me a recording that had been made in a classroom the previous morning as students were settling in. "We are hoping to be able to use it to make inferences—like what peer groups exist in the classroom," he said. (Pity the student who tries to pass notes under AltVideo's watchful eye.)

Mediratta envisaged a time when AltSchool technology would get "into the sci-fi realm." What insights might be drawn from aggregated data culled from video and audio? He spoke of the video moments that teachers were bookmarking. "The next useful thing would be for us to analyze all the things that are bookmarked, and to draw inferences," Mediratta said. "Like, bookmarks seem to happen when the classroom is noisy. So let's generate a few other interesting moments that the teacher might want to look at—say, a moment when the classroom was full of kids but was dead quiet. What was happening there? Is this good? Is this bad? Or you could look at a moment when it was absolutely chaotic—but maybe that is what the activity called for. So we can start applying machine learning to this data to start driving inferences. Maybe what we should be doing is detecting when the classroom gets noisy, and then we could have the head of the school, who is also an educator, stop by your classroom and participate and help."

**W**HEN THE ALTSCHOOL technologists who participated in the December hackathon shared their discoveries at the end of the session, the team that had focussed on bookmarking video seemed particularly pleased with its innovations. The team had decided to try to find a "fun route" to help teachers request a video clip of a moment in class.



*"Try to stay calm, Mr. Donaldson—there's no use both of us panicking!"*

• •

know—me digging around with the phone in my pocket," came the answer.

From the back of the room, a woman spoke up: "Did you test it with a female?"

Many participants laughed. "I'm serious," the questioner went on. "A lot of our teachers are females, and they carry phones in different places."

The members of the bookmark team, all of whom were male, looked deflated. In coming up with their apparently elegant solution, they had not visualized a female teacher slapping her bottom to activate a phone tucked into her back pocket.

"That's a really good point," one of them acknowledged, his smile waning. "Yeah, it could use a lot of fine-tuning. This was just, like, hey, get ourselves to a demo." They had failed fast and failed forward. That was what they were supposed to do. Tomorrow, they would iterate. ♦

"The idea is that the teacher could, in theory, just knock twice on their phone," one team member said. He patted twice on his device, which was buried in the front pocket of his jeans, to demonstrate the ease and unobtrusiveness of the gesture.

Another member of the team tapped on his laptop, and a graph that resembled an echocardiogram, with troughs and spikes, appeared on a large video screen at the head of the table. A third team member, a young man with a starter beard, tapped twice on his phone, and the graph reappeared with a new spike—the result of his tapping.

There were cheers around the room as the developers explained how they had filtered the data so that the jostling motions of a teacher walking upstairs, say, would not show up as a bookmark. "It's reasonably robust," one said, with pride. Someone asked about a cluster of spikes on the graph. "That was, I don't

# THE BIDDING WAR

*How a young Afghan military contractor became spectacularly rich.*

BY MATTHIEU AIKINS

**A**MERICA'S WAR IN Afghanistan, which is now in its fifteenth year, presents a mystery: how could so much money, power, and good will have achieved so little? Congress has appropriated almost eight hundred billion dollars for military operations in Afghanistan; a hundred and thirteen billion has gone to reconstruction, more than was spent on the Marshall Plan, in postwar Europe. General David Petraeus, a principal architect of U.S. counterinsurgency strategy, encouraged the practice of pumping money into the economy of Afghanistan, where the per-capita G.D.P. at the time of the invasion was around a hundred and twenty dollars. He believed that money had helped buy peace during his command of American forces in Iraq. "Employ money as a weapons system," Petraeus wrote in 2008. "Money can be 'ammunition.'"

The result was a war waged as much by for-profit companies as by the military. Political debate in Washington has focussed on the number of troops deployed in Afghanistan and the losses that they have sustained. To minimize casualties, the military outsourced any task that it could: maintenance, cooking and laundry, overland logistics, even security. Since 2007, there have regularly been more contractors than U.S. forces in Afghanistan; today, they outnumber them three to one.

One result has been forms of corruption so extreme that the military has, in some cases, funded its own enemy. When a House committee investigated the trucking system that supplied American forces, it found that the system had "fueled a vast protection racket run by a shadowy network of warlords, strongmen, commanders, corrupt Afghan officials, and perhaps others." Its report concluded that "protection payments for safe passage are a significant potential source of fund-

ing for the Taliban." The system risked "undermining the U.S. strategy for achieving its goals in Afghanistan."

The system has also made a few individuals very rich. Hikmatullah Shadman, an Afghan trucking-company owner, earned more than a hundred and sixty million dollars while contracting for the United States military; for the past three years, he has been battling to save much of his fortune in a federal court in Washington, D.C. In *United States of America v. Sum of \$70,990,605, et al.*, the Justice Department has accused Hikmat, as he's known, of bribing contractors and soldiers to award him contracts. Hikmat has maintained his innocence, even as eight soldiers have pleaded guilty in related criminal cases. Several members of the Special Forces who have not been accused of wrongdoing have defended him. In a deposition, Major Jerry (Rusty) Bradley, a veteran Special Forces officer, said, "The only way to right a wrong of this magnitude is to be willing to draw your sword and defend everything that you believe in."

I first met Hikmat in June, 2014, at his office in downtown Kabul, on a main road crowded with taxis and venders hawking stewed chickpeas. The compound once belonged to Ahmad Zahir, a famous pop singer of the nineteen-seventies. We sat in a living room that, with its low ceiling, floral wall print, and paper lanterns, resembled a California den from that period.

Hikmat, who is in his late twenties, looks disarmingly young and gentle. Slim, with a high brow that he often furrows, he countered the charges against him in grave, deliberate English. "The people who did this investigation were sitting in air-conditioned rooms," he told me. "They don't know what was happening in the field." He offered to explain how he had made

his fortune. "I was part of the Special Forces family," he said. "I was trained by them."

**B**EFORE THE AMERICANS came, Hikmat lived with his father, a schoolteacher; his mother; and five siblings in a four-room mud-walled house in one of the oldest parts of Kandahar City, in southern Afghanistan. In the summer of 2001, Hikmat was fourteen years old, and he and his friends chafed at the narrowness of life under the Taliban. No one had a telephone, televisions were banned, and there was rarely any electricity. Sometimes, Hikmat recalled, the Taliban would round up the schoolboys and take them to see executions at the city's soccer stadium. "There was a black umbrella on top of us," he said. "We were not connected to the world."

Eager for a glimpse of life outside Afghanistan, Hikmat would watch movies at the house of a Hindu friend, on a tiny, illicit television with the volume turned low and the blinds pulled down. They liked Bollywood dramas and Hollywood action films, and would try out the foreign-sounding names: Van Damme, Bruce Lee, Rambo. At home, in the evenings, Hikmat's father listened to the BBC's Pashto service while taking notes on world events in a diary. "My father was always studying at night," Hikmat said. "He was always working."

On September 11, 2001, Hikmat came home to find his parents sitting by the radio, stunned by the news from New York. Like many Afghans, they didn't understand why their country was said to be responsible, but it soon became clear that the Americans would attack. Hikmat imagined that, like the action heroes in his films, they would come on foot, in a spray of bullets. He was so excited, he said, that he sneaked out and wrote in chalk on the wall of a mosque, "Long live Bush."

The Americans came in B-52s instead,



*Within the U.S. government, there is growing recognition that our expenditures in Afghanistan have been self-defeating.*

raining bombs on the Taliban and the Arab foreign fighters who had become their allies. Hikmat and his family fled across the border to Karachi, in Pakistan. Kabul fell in November, but Kandahar held out until December 7th, when a convoy of Afghan militiamen, led by the warlord Gul Agha Sherzai, entered the city, accompanied by C.I.A. advisers and U.S. Special Forces.

Hikmat's family rushed back to Kandahar. The next day, residents celebrated and played music in the streets. For the first time in years, videocassettes were sold openly. When a convoy of Special Forces drove through town, with soldiers as muscled and heavily armed as Rambo, Hikmat joined the crowd that was walking alongside them, waving and smiling. On the radio, the country's new leader, forty-three-year-old Hamid Karzai, a former diplomat, promised a bright future of peace and development; after decades of war and isolation, the economy was reviving in Kandahar.

But, that winter, Hikmat's father fell ill with stomach cancer, and died soon afterward. To support his mother and sisters, Hikmat tended a French-fry and juice stand. In June, 2002, he found work cleaning and making repairs at a Special Forces base that the Americans had set up at Kandahar's airport.

Sami Ghairatmal, a childhood friend, told me that Hikmat was always driven to improve himself. "He studied more than us," he said. "He learned good and fluent English." After the project at the base ended, a friend of Hikmat's who was working as a security guard for the U.S. military asked Hikmat to see him about another job. Borrowing his brother's motorcycle, Hikmat drove out to the former compound of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, in the hills north of the city. Both the C.I.A. and the Special Forces had set up at the compound, which they called Camp Gecko, after the noisy lizards that lived there. The roof was destroyed, but workers were putting up new buildings. Eventually, the complex had a cafeteria with a fireplace, a fountain with catfish, and a swimming pool.

Hikmat's friend took him to meet Bryan Myers, a twenty-two-year-old

engineering sergeant who had just arrived for his first tour in Afghanistan with the Desert Eagles, a battalion of the 3rd Special Forces Group, which deployed frequently to Kandahar in the course of the war. Myers was a barrel-chested man who, like most Green Berets, as the Special Forces are known, had a beard that distinguished him

from the clean-shaven regular troops. He later wrote an account of his meeting with Hikmat, which Hikmat's lawyers submitted in court:

"How old are you, kid?"  
"I am 16, about, sir."  
"Yeah no, that's not going to

happen. Sorry but there is no way. Tony, I am sorry but we can't hire a kid, it's too dangerous and he doesn't bring anything to the table."

As Hikmat turned to go, Myers mentioned that a rucksack and some gun covers needed repairing; Hikmat offered to do it. His mother sewed up the rucksack, and when he declined payment Myers and the team, impressed by his honesty, decided to take him on:

"Hik, your English is pretty good. You know what we do here right?"

"Of course, you are the bearded ones, everybody knows what you do. That is why I want to work with you."

Laughing, I just put my hand on his shoulder and respond "Welcome aboard."

Hikmat spent the next three years as an interpreter, living and fighting alongside Myers and other Green Berets. He earned up to fifteen hundred dollars a month, twenty times the salary of an Afghan police officer. "In the eyes of Hikmatullah, the bearded ones were sent upon him as an answer to many of [his] prayers," Myers wrote.

The Special Forces, who are known as "quiet professionals," focus less on commando raids—the hallmark of other élite units, such as the Delta Force and the Navy SEALS—than on training and fighting with allied local forces. During the invasion, they had embedded with Afghan warlords and their militias, and afterward they were left behind to hunt the remnants of the Taliban and Al Qaeda across Afghanistan's remote mountains and deserts.

"We were inherently different," Rusty Bradley, who served as an officer with

the Desert Eagles, wrote in "Lions of Kandahar," a 2011 memoir. "We ate, slept, lived, and breathed with the Afghan people as if we had done so all our lives, immersing ourselves in their language and culture." Bradley deployed to Kandahar eight times, eventually learning rudimentary Pashto. After Myers rotated back to the U.S., Hikmat worked for Bradley's team, and the two grew close. He compared Bradley, who weighed two hundred and thirty pounds, to Sylvester Stallone; Bradley has credited Hikmat with saving his life by putting himself between Bradley and an armed insurgent. "I wasn't just an interpreter," Hikmat told me.

By 2006, the American military was focussed mostly on Iraq, and the Taliban had retaken much of the countryside in southern Afghanistan. That summer, Bradley and Myers redeployed with the Desert Eagles to Kandahar. In Operation Medusa, one of the largest battles of the war, U.S. and Canadian troops attacked Taliban fighters west of the city with tanks, artillery, and airpower. "It looked like a monster had stomped through the valley, leaving skeletons of compounds smoldering and tops of trees jagged and twisted," Bradley wrote.

Hikmat's mother, fearing for his safety, pleaded with him to stop working as an interpreter. Three interpreters in Kandahar had recently been captured and beheaded by the Taliban. "I lied to my mom," he said, telling her that he had stayed on the base during the operation. He had started a side business selling fruit and soft drinks to the base, and that winter he quit his job as an interpreter in order to work on the business full time. Hikmat told me that a sergeant major at the Special Forces headquarters helped him register it at the main U.S. base, known as Kandahar Airfield, or KAF. On February 25, 2007, Hikmat signed a "blanket purchase agreement" with the U.S. military, an open-ended contract for trucking services. He started with a single rented truck.

**H**IKMAT'S ENTRY INTO the trucking business brought him into competition with some of Kandahar's most powerful men. Gul Agha Sherzai, the warlord who had retaken the province with the help of the C.I.A. and Special Forces, had been the governor; his



brother Abdul Raziq was a general in the Afghan Army, in charge of the airport. The Sherzais also controlled lucrative contracts to supply gravel to the American base, and Raziq's company, Sherzai Construction and Supply, provided trucks to the Americans. "We've had a friendship since 2001," Raziq told me in his office on KAF. He had a framed photograph on his desk of himself with General John Campbell, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. "From that time, I'm their partner."

To many Afghans, warlords like the Sherzais were scarcely more legitimate than the Taliban. After the Communist government fell, in 1992, Gul Agha and his men had taken part in the civil war that pillaged Kandahar. Now, "with U.S. dollars," Governor Sherzai "had constituted his own private militia," Sarah Chayes, a journalist turned aid worker, writes, in "The Punishment of Virtue," her 2006 account of life in Kandahar. But the Americans saw the political landscape in Afghanistan through the dichotomies of the war on terror, and in Kandahar they relied on the Sherzais to help identify the enemy. "Before long, the U.S. forces were helplessly wrapped inside the [Sherzais'] friendly bear hug," Chayes continues. Bradley, who referred to the Taliban as "savages," wrote, "Every day was like September 12, 2001." Raids by U.S. Special Operations Forces, in conjunction with the Sherzais, compelled former Taliban leaders to move to Pakistan, where they began to revive the insurgency.

As an interpreter, Hikmat had often been in meetings with the Sherzais, though they hardly noticed him in those days. "We wouldn't even greet him, I remember," Khalid Pashtoon, a member of the Afghan parliament who was then an aide to Gul Agha Sherzai, said. Hikmat told me that he understood why the Americans aligned themselves with people like the Sherzais against the Taliban. "There is bad and worse," he said. "You would choose bad."

Now he was their rival in a more and more lucrative business. Unlike the Iraq war, in which international companies brought in supplies, in Afghanistan the military outsourced its overland-logistics chain to local contractors, whose jingle trucks, so called because of their colorful, tinkling metal decorations,

hauled cargo to bases across the country's remote and increasingly dangerous terrain. In the beginning, contractors like Hikmat were paid in cash by the U.S. military after missions were completed. Glad to have an alternative to the Sherzais, the Special Forces welcomed him. "I was never saying no to any job," Hikmat said. "They want anything, anytime, and you have to be ready."

Hikmat had chosen the right time to start. Between 2007 and 2010, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan increased from fourteen thousand to nearly a hundred thousand. And they were outnumbered by a second, private army: by June, 2010, more than a hundred and seven thousand contractors were working for the Department of Defense. The jobs were dangerous—more contractors had been killed so far that year than U.S. soldiers—but the payoff was substantial. Between 2007 and 2014, the U.S. spent eighty-nine billion dollars on contracting in Afghanistan.

"There were so many contracts out there that you could win anything you wanted," Simon Hilliard, a former British soldier who worked on KAF as the managing director of Watan Risk Management, an Afghan-owned security company, told me. "The margins were insane." He said that, in eighteen months, Watan's revenues increased from

five hundred thousand dollars to fifty-eight million.

Built as a spartan military encampment, KAF became a city of tens of thousands, with paved roads and a state-of-the-art trauma hospital, as well as a Burger King and a T.G.I. Friday's, all coated with fine desert dust and permeated by the smell of the "poo pond." The U.S. and its allies eventually built more than five hundred military bases in Afghanistan. Many of them had hot showers and Internet cafés. Soldiers who patrolled mud-walled villages without plumbing or electricity, in temperatures that rose to a hundred and thirty degrees, slept in air-conditioned tents so cold that they needed blankets. It all consumed enormous amounts of fuel: in 2010, Bagram Airfield, which was comparable in size to KAF, used nearly 1.6 million gallons per week.

Most of the fuel was transported by trucks like Hikmat's, and what had originally been an ad-hoc system grew into a countrywide network that handled billions of dollars in freight. Even its management was outsourced. In October, 2007, not long after Hikmat rented his first truck, the contract to set up a Jingle Truck Coordination Office, a job originally handled by the U.S. military, was signed by TOIFOR, a German company that was founded in the nineteen-nineties to supply portable toilets to NATO



*"See—all the thrills of outdoor activity with none of the risks!"*

forces preparing to go into Bosnia. "It was an absolutely minor, small, small, little thing," Karl Friedrich Krause, one of the company's founders, told me. "A small job done by one guy."

That guy was Roren Stowell, a Denver native with a snowboarder's drawl. "We were about two weeks away from taking over," Stowell told me. "They didn't have a pencil." As troop levels surged, Stowell said, "where before they were doing maybe twenty trucks a week, in a short amount of time we were going upward of four or five hundred trucks on any given day."

Stowell went on, "There were million-dollar truck runs, paying upward of forty-five thousand dollars per truck." The military didn't seem to mind the expense, as long as U.S. soldiers didn't have to risk their lives on the road. The attitude, he said, was "Fuck it. There's an endless amount of money—just get the trucks there and keep the customers happy."

The money created a local ecosystem, with KAF at its apex. Stowell and his team awarded supply requests from military units to a group of Afghan trucking companies, based on price, availability, and dependability. He soon realized that, while his subcontractors—who included both Hikmat and Sherzai—had their own fleets, they also acted as brokers for the rest of Kandahar's

truckers, hiring them and adding a hefty percentage to the cost. The subcontractors' advantage was their access to the base and what were known locally as *awwal las*, or "first-hand," contracts.

Millions of dollars were being paid by the U.S. government to private companies, but the intermediary was typically a low-level military officer, contractor, or civil servant. The temptation to take part in the profiteering was substantial. According to a study published in May, 2015, by the Center for Public Integrity, at least a hundred and fifteen U.S. service members who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have been convicted of bribery, theft, and contract-rigging charges since 2005.

"It was obvious that there was an opportunity to make money by giving a specific company more missions," Stowell said. He told me that once, when he was sent to Dubai to collect sewer-cleaning equipment, one of TOIFOR's subcontractors, Tawazuh, offered to have someone guide him around the city. "I'm picturing this guy who will take me to HomePro," Stowell said. Instead, several men picked him up in a Mercedes-Benz. They offered him a Rolex watch as a gift, which he refused. "I'm like, dude, I'm looking for a Roto-Rooter, I don't need a fucking entourage," Stowell told me. Undeterred, the men drove him around Dubai and, that evening,

tried to introduce him to some Russian women at a night club. Stowell said he told them, "I can't take any Rolexes, I can't take any hos, and I don't want to go to any more dinners." (Sadeeq Mohmand, Tawazuh's owner, has denied offering gifts or bribes.)

While Stowell decided which Afghan companies would supply conventional units, the Special Forces were allowed to choose the companies they preferred, on the ground that they had unique requirements. "They'd come in and be like, No way, the only company that's going to do it is this company," Stowell said. "And I'm like, Yeah, man, but they're three times the price of the other guys."

Hikmat had just begun his business when Stowell arrived on KAF. By the time he left, in late 2008, Hikmat was making his first millions. "He kind of came in as an underdog," Stowell said. "He was so young. I was just sitting there thinking, How's this guy doing it?"

**I**N JANUARY, 2008, Tonya Long, a twenty-five-year-old staff sergeant, arrived on KAF, where she spent six months working with the Jingle Truck Office and its contractors to coordinate her unit's resupply missions. In late 2010, federal agents confronted her over her lavish spending on furniture, a trucking business, and a vacation to Disney World. She pleaded guilty to smuggling back to the U.S. approximately a million dollars in cash, stuffed inside VCRs, money that she said had come from Afghan contractors.

Long, who is serving a five-year prison sentence, told me in an e-mail that the bribery scheme was already in place when she arrived on KAF. She was involved in an affair with an Army captain who worked in logistics for the Bush Hogs, a sister battalion of the Desert Eagles in the 3rd Special Forces Group. The captain, she wrote, had been taking bribes from Tawazuh in return for steering contracts to the company and for creating fake missions, which the U.S. government was billed for. (Mohmand has denied this.) When the Bush Hogs were replaced by another Special Forces battalion, in early 2008, the captain's successor, Captain Franklin Rivera-Medina, took over the scheme, but he favored another company: Hikmat's.



*"Wait! Anybody that amazing with balloons deserves to live."*

To justify the choice of contractors, the first captain "said that ONLY Tawazuh was reliable and Rivera said that ONLY Hikmat was reliable," Long, who also had an affair with Rivera, wrote.

The first captain, who retired from the military, was never charged, and refused to comment. The Justice Department also declined to comment. (At Long's sentencing hearing, the prosecution stated, "We know that the prior captain did the false-claim scheme as well.")

Rivera, when questioned by the F.B.I., admitted to receiving eighty thousand dollars from Hikmat. He pleaded guilty to charges of cash smuggling and taking gratuities, but he died in 2014, before he could be sentenced. According to a prosecution document, Hikmat admitted to paying Rivera a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash, but he said that the money was compensation to the military for missing shipments.

**B**ANK STATEMENTS SUBMITTED in court by Hikmat's lawyers show that fluctuations in his earnings appear to correlate with the presence of different Special Forces battalions in Kandahar. His first six months of invoices to TOIFOR averaged a hundred thousand dollars a month; after April, 2008, when Rivera arrived on KAF, they rose sharply, totalling almost thirteen million dollars for the rest of the year. Then, in early 2009, Bradley and the Desert Eagles were back in Kandahar. Hikmat's invoices kept climbing, reaching \$7.7 million in May; by the end of the year, he had billed TOIFOR more than forty-five million dollars. Captain Edward Woodall, a supply officer with the Desert Eagles, later wrote that the Special Forces "required a level of trust and dependability that only Mr. Shadman could provide."

But in the winter of 2010 a new Special Forces battalion arrived, and it seemed to prefer Tawazuh. That month, Hikmat billed for less than half a million dollars. In Kandahar, Mohmand, Tawazuh's owner, showed me a certificate of appreciation signed by the battalion's commander. "I worked with the Americans very honestly and sincerely," he said. "My rates are also less than other contractors'."

When the Desert Eagles returned

later that year, Hikmat's business recovered. Woodall, who was in charge of the service detachment, obtained a "sole source" memo, which the Desert Eagles used to bypass TOIFOR's selection process and to work with Hikmat when they wanted. Hikmat set his own prices, and, according to his lawyers, they were reviewed by both TOIFOR and the military. "I think I remember hearing that it was more expensive to use Hikmat than the other companies, but that was all right with my chain of command because the mission was more dangerous and he was the only one who could and would do it," Caleb Hardin, one of Woodall's subordinates, wrote in a declaration submitted by Hikmat's lawyers.

Hikmat's invoices to TOIFOR reached new heights. Bradley and Myers were back in Kandahar during the Bush Hogs' next rotation, which replaced Woodall's in early 2011. In September alone, Hikmat's invoices to TOIFOR amounted to \$17.4 million. One form from the Bush Hogs requesting a trucking mission contains a handwritten justification for Hikmat's higher prices: "Always on time, never any issues, and understands how [Special Forces] operates." Hikmat's bid was five thousand dollars; those of three other Afghan subcontractors were \$2,500, \$2,124, and \$1,000.

Hikmat told me that his higher prices were the result of the extra flexibility he gave the Special Forces. Often, he said, they would change the mission at the last minute, for security reasons. "I told them, don't tell me the date, don't tell me the time, and don't tell me the destination," he said.

Hikmat's earnings from TOIFOR made up the lion's share of a highly lucrative business. According to his bank statements, his logistics companies took in a hundred and sixty-seven million dollars between late 2007 and the end of 2012. During that period, he withdrew eighty-eight million. Even assuming that the withdrawals were all for business expenses, rather than investments or personal spending (Hikmat also owned a gas station and an energy-drink company, and employed a mostly Filipino office staff, led by Western expatriates), that left him with almost eighty million dollars—a profit margin of nearly fifty per cent. (According to Hikmat's lawyer, Hikmat has millions of dollars

in unpaid debts, and is owed between fifty and sixty million dollars by the U.S. government.)

By the time he was in his early twenties, Hikmat was one of the wealthiest men in Kandahar. He got married, made the hajj, and travelled through Europe, visiting the Eiffel Tower and the stadium where Real Madrid, his favorite soccer team, plays. Every Ramadan, he showered money on those in his neighborhood he judged to be poor and deserving. Rumors spread that Hikmat would drive around in an old car, a scarf half obscuring his face, handing out hundred-dollar bills to laborers. One cash giveaway at his gas station led to a near-riot that had to be dispersed with live ammunition. It was around this time that people started calling him Shadman, which means "happy."

The vast sums that he was handling also impressed the foreigners on KAF. Once, Hikmat told me, a Canadian soldier who searched him at the entrance found ten thousand dollars. He marvelled at the thick bundle of bills. "He said, 'Oh, wow, just hit me with it on my face. I like it, I've never seen such money,'" Hikmat said, smiling at the memory.

Hikmat outfitted his living quarters on KAF with flat-screen TVs and opulent furniture, including an oversized bed. "Nothing fits together, because it's the most expensive stuff that's picked out of every magazine," one of Hikmat's managers said. "Everything's gold and shiny, and it's got crystal in it." Yet Hikmat never used his ornate bed, preferring, like most Afghans, to sleep on a mat on the floor. "He sat cross-legged with the locals, with baba and the guy that makes the food," the manager said.

The Special Forces were frequent visitors. In 2011, Hikmat hosted a Christmas party, and Myers attended. In a photograph, Myers is wearing a checked shirt, and appears conspicuously massive next to Hikmat's diminutive Filipino employees. There was a plastic Christmas tree on a stand draped in an American flag. The guests ate pizza and drank Red Bull, and Hikmat, beaming and rosy-cheeked, handed out gifts from a secret-Santa exchange. Myers took part in a three-legged race, pulling one of the Filipino staff people along with him. "It was one of the most bizarre

evenings of my life," Franco Swart, a South African who managed one of Hikmat's trucking companies, said.

But Hikmat was under pressure in Kandahar. He said that the Taliban had attempted to kidnap his brother, and had also threatened him at his family's house. "After a few days, they stuck a letter on the door, that in three days if you don't leave the job we will kill even the kids," he said. In February, 2011, he had applied to a State Department program that allowed interpreters and other Afghan employees of the U.S. to emigrate to America. "I am requesting a Visa to the US in the case of an emergency," he wrote, citing the Taliban's threat to his life. Bradley and three other Special Forces soldiers provided supporting letters. The Bush Hogs' commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel William Carty, wrote, "The loyalty and commitment Hikmatullah displays in supporting [the special-operations task force] and its mission goes unmatched."

**I**N NOVEMBER, 2009, Scott Lindsay, a staffer on the House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, was flying back from Pakistan when George Miller, a Democratic representative from California, handed him an article from *The Nation*. "How the US Funds the Taliban," by Aram Roston, claimed that Afghan trucking companies working for the American military were paying off insurgents. "Scott, do you know anything about this?" Miller asked.

Over the next eight months, Lindsay and a team from the subcommittee interviewed U.S. military officials and contractors and reviewed thousands of documents. "It was immediately glaring that, oh, my God, this could be as bad as alleged," Lindsay told me.

The U.S. military had decided to make trucking companies responsible for hiring their own security. As the country descended into violence, the companies were forced to pay off the men who controlled the roads, whether they were crooked officials, warlords, or Taliban. "The whole thing became this inadvertently but inherently corrupt enterprise that, to me, symbolized the failure of the entire adventure," Lindsay said. "If you have to pay your enemy for the right to be there, something's gone wrong."

In June, 2010, the subcommittee re-

leased a report, titled "Warlord, Inc.," which concluded that U.S. government funds were likely going to the same people who were killing American soldiers. According to the subcommittee, the military had known about the problem for at least a year, but, Lindsay told me, "absolutely nothing was done."

The perception among many of the trucking companies on KAF was that the U.S. military was turning a blind eye to where its money was ending up. "We all knew what was happening," Rodney Castleman, an American employee of an Afghan trucking company, told me. "You could be hardcore about stuff and say, We're not going to pay nobody, but, I'm telling you, you were going to get hit on the road."

The report landed amid a growing realization in Washington that corruption in Afghanistan was jeopardizing President Obama's plan to stabilize the country before withdrawing American troops. That fall, Afghanistan's financial system nearly collapsed after it was revealed that a group of well-connected businessmen and officials—including the brothers of President Karzai and his first Vice-President—had fraudulently acquired nearly a billion dollars in loans from Kabul Bank. Far from being a source of stability, American money was part of the problem, and U.S. officials had little idea where it was going.

"I am deeply troubled that the U.S. military can pursue, attack, and even kill



terrorists and their supporters," John Sopko, the head of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), later wrote in a quarterly report to Congress, "but that some in the U.S. government believe we cannot prevent these same people from receiving a government contract."

"You know, Taliban soldiers are a hundred times cheaper than American soldiers," Pashtoon, the member of parliament from Kandahar, said. "So for a

lot less money the Taliban can fight for a long time."

The military had long been reluctant to address corruption. But now General Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, conceded that the flood of U.S. money into Afghanistan was "both an opportunity and a danger." He added that, uncontrolled, it could "unintentionally fuel corruption, finance insurgent networks, strengthen criminal patronage networks, and undermine our efforts in Afghanistan." Money, it seemed, was a double-edged weapons system.

The military created Task Force 2010, a team of forensic accountants, law-enforcement agents, intelligence analysts, lawyers, and auditors, to scrutinize Afghan contractors. The team reported that, of the thirty-one billion dollars in contracts that it inspected, an estimated three hundred and sixty million dollars had reached corrupt officials, criminals, or the Taliban. Thomas Creal, the lead forensic accountant on the task force, told me that U.S. taxpayer dollars reached the insurgents through a layer of intermediaries that began with the contractors. "I always viewed them as an aider and abettor of terrorist acts," he said.

In 2010, as investigators descended on KAF, contractors there began to come under scrutiny. "The military came in and did their audits," Castleman said. "We got audited." In October, the U.S. military detained Mohmand, Tawazuh's owner, on suspicion of making payments to the Taliban. Though he was quickly released, his company was barred from receiving further contracts.

In May, 2011, Hikmat, too, was banned from receiving contracts from the military, because of allegations that he had "direct association with individuals who have been involved in significant criminal activity or insurgent operations," according to a declassified report presented in court. Creal said that his team had initially flagged Hikmat because his invoices were so high. "It wasn't hard to come to the conclusion that Shadman was getting way more money than he should have," Creal told me.

But Hikmat's allies in the Special Forces believed that his rivals, including General Raziq Sherzai, were jealous of his success, and that the accusations were based on false information

that they gave to military investigators. "Some of Hik's competitors were always trying to make his life difficult," Bradley wrote. (Raziq Sherzai denied this.)

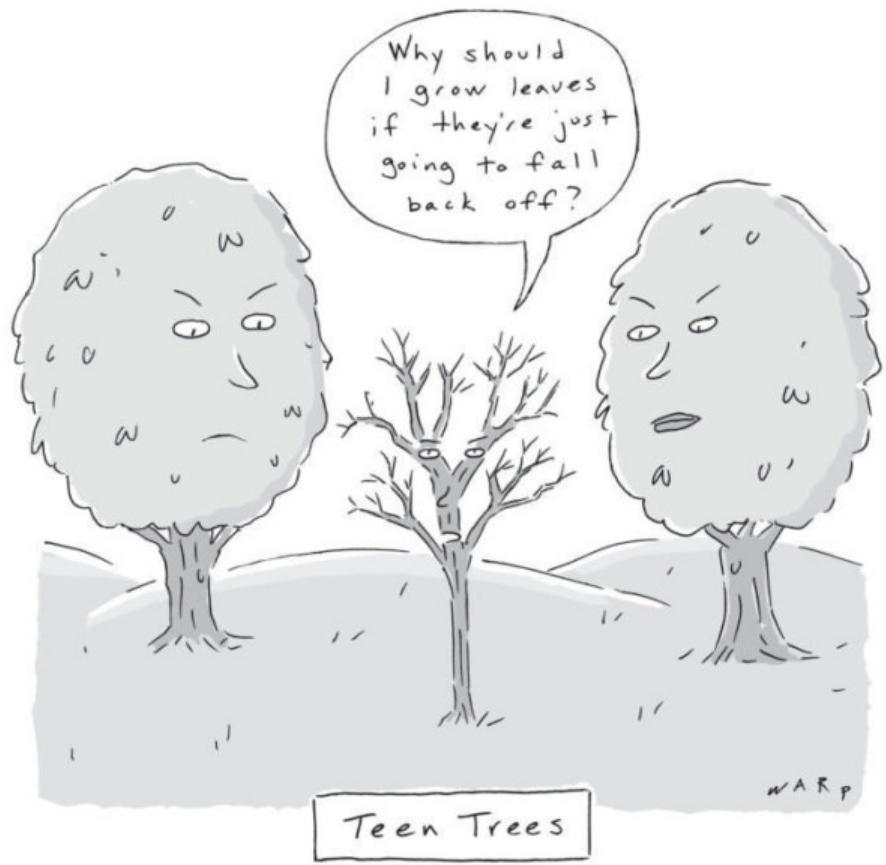
Myers told the court that he "began digging deep into both sides of the allegations." After Hikmat took a polygraph test, Myers got the Bush Hogs' commander to lead a successful effort to remove the ban on him. In the next six months, Hikmat's companies billed TOIRFOR for more than fifty million dollars.

But the military investigators had come to believe that Hikmat may have been paying off the Taliban. According to Creal, they discovered transfers from his account to an alleged Taliban "money mover," who, it was rumored, was connected to a suicide bombing on KAF. Twice that year, attackers had detonated cars packed with explosives at the base's main gate, killing dozens of Afghan civilians. Around 4 A.M. on October 1, 2012, a U.S. military team raided Hikmat's compound.

**H**IKMAT'S FIRST THOUGHT, when armed men kicked in his bedroom door, was that the Taliban had come for him. The men cursed him in Pashto, but when they dragged him outside he saw, to his relief, that there were American soldiers with them. He was blindfolded, shackled, and flown across the country to the main U.S. detention facility in Afghanistan, at Bagram Airfield. "The way they treated me and the place they put me in the jail," Hikmat told me, his voice trailing off. "It was a toilet."

In intake, he was subjected to the same fate as those he had once hunted alongside the Special Forces. His head was shaved, and he was forced to strip and wash under the guards' supervision, an ordeal that Hikmat, having grown up in conservative Kandahar, found particularly humiliating. "This is why President Karzai says that this is the factory of the Taliban," he said. "How they treat people!"

Hikmat denied any connection with the Taliban, and passed a polygraph test. "In Pashto, we have a proverb that you cannot hold two watermelons in one hand," Hikmat told me. "When I was fifteen, I started working with you guys. I am one of the family members of the Special Forces, and I worked against the Taliban."



According to a declaration submitted in court by Hikmat's lawyers, the civilian interrogator who questioned him for two months at Bagram came to believe that he was innocent. The evidence against him was flimsy and, the interrogator suspected, provided by "disgruntled former employees or business competitors who were known to be jealous and resentful of Hikmatullah's success."

At the time, Afghans detained by the U.S. military were entitled to a hearing within sixty days, at which three officers determined whether they were still a threat to U.S. and allied forces and, if not, whether they should be released. A group of Hikmat's Afghan supporters approached Gul Agha Sherzai, the former governor of Kandahar, and asked for his help. Sherzai remained close to the U.S. military leadership and often intervened in support of detainees; he had already helped secure the release of Mohmand, Tuwazuh's owner.

On December 9, 2012, the day of the hearing, Sherzai arrived at Bagram, along with a group of tribal elders from Kandahar. He, too, was unimpressed by the

evidence presented by the military investigators. "They had no documents," Sherzai told me. Even so, he found it plausible that both Mohmand and Hikmat were paying off the Taliban, since it was a widespread practice in the trucking business. "They weren't powerful enough to face the Taliban," he said. "Why would it be that easy for them to pass with their convoys?"

With Sherzai and the Special Forces vouching for Hikmat, the three officers voted to clear him. After he was released, he flew back to Kandahar. "I think it broke his spirit for a bit," Hikmat's employee Franco Swart told me. In Hikmat's absence, the business had largely shut down. On January 23, 2013, Hikmat flew to Dubai, and started shopping for a piece of very expensive real estate.

**S**INCE THE BEGINNING of the war, Dubai has been a magnet for Afghans seeking to move their fortunes out of the country. Hikmat told me that, since he could no longer operate on KAF, he had decided to invest in property. He



*"I promise to love, honor, and stay the hell off Facebook."*

settled on Ahli House Tower, a residential apartment block of approximately two hundred units. On February 23rd, he signed a contract to buy it for forty-three million dollars. But when he called his bank in Kabul he was told that his accounts had been frozen.

While Hikmat was detained at Bagram, the Justice Department, working with SIGAR, had filed a civil-forfeiture suit, claiming that Hikmat had paid bribes in order to obtain contracts. "The civil route made sense," a former Justice Department official who worked on Hikmat's case said. "There's no extradition agreement, no way that he'd be arrested in Afghanistan." Since Hikmat's bank accounts were in Kabul, the Justice Department section at the U.S. Embassy had to persuade the Afghan attorney general's office to recognize the warrant, something that had never been done before. The attorney general, Mohammad Ishaq Aloko, a Karzai protégé, was out of the country undergoing medical treatment; in his absence, his deputy acquiesced.

When Hikmat returned from Dubai, on February 28th, he went straight to the attorney general's office, where he was told that he was under investigation. Later, prosecutors called him back

and arrested him. He was thrown into prison for several hours, until a call came from the Presidential palace, ordering his release.

"Shadman's case was a very fishy case," a former senior official in the Afghan attorney general's office said. "Karzai was calling us saying, 'What happened with this case? The money was supposed to be released.'"

Aimal Faizi, a spokesperson for Karzai, denied that Karzai had any personal interest in the case. "For President Karzai, it was just another case of illegal detention of an Afghan citizen by the U.S. forces in Afghanistan," he said.

Hikmat's accounts were unfrozen, and he transferred seventy-four million dollars to bank accounts in Dubai. When the Justice Department officials at the Embassy learned that the Afghan government had unblocked the accounts, they were furious. "One of our people went over and confronted the attorney general about it," the former official said, telling him that he had "lost a great opportunity to demonstrate to the international community the integrity of your legal system."

But Hikmat was still vulnerable. When funds targeted by a civil-forfeiture suit are held outside the reach of

the U.S. government, it has the authority to seize equivalent funds held by those foreign banks in the U.S. In May, 2013, the U.S. restrained funds in the correspondent accounts of Hikmat's banks in New York, forcing the banks to freeze fifty-seven million dollars of his money in Dubai and Kabul.

THE CIVIL-FORFEITURE SUIT has not yet gone to trial, and both the Justice Department and SIGAR declined to speak with me about it. Hikmat's lawyers have filed reams of documents in court—including bank statements, depositions, and business records—but the government has barely outlined its case, which alleges that Hikmat paid bribes to both U.S. soldiers and TOIFOR contractors, including some of Stowell's successors at the Jingle Truck Office.

Yet the Justice Department has prosecuted a series of related criminal cases in North Carolina, where Fort Bragg, the home of the Special Forces, is situated. On September 29th, five current and former Army sergeants were sentenced for taking illegal payments. Several of them wept as they spoke of their betrayal of the military and their families. If "you did something that impaired the Army's fighting ability," Judge Terrence Boyle said, referring to earlier wars, "they would court-martial and shoot you." He then handed down sentences that ranged from ten months to ten years. "I mean, how do you explain it to somebody whose child or spouse or loved one, you know, died in one of these theatres?"

Four of the soldiers had worked in the Bush Hogs logistics section in Kandahar from February, 2011, to January, 2012, Hikmat's most lucrative period. According to court documents, the soldiers created fake trucking missions—some signed with names like Bongo Truck and Touchi Meh—and allowed Hikmat's drivers to steal fuel in return for cash payments.

These criminal cases suggest long-running fraud within the Special Forces' service detachment on KAF. The lawyer for the soldiers' leader, Sergeant First Class Jeffrey Edmondson, said that Edmondson learned about the scheme from his predecessor on KAF, a staff sergeant who worked for Woodall and the Desert Eagles. The prosecution

stated that it was in the process of investigating that unit. (“My military career is over, and I’m done with that portion of my life. And that’s that,” the staff sergeant told me when I reached him by phone, before declining to speak further. He has not been charged.) Another soldier, Sergeant First Class Robert Green, admitted to receiving at least forty-five thousand dollars from Hikmat in 2008, and said that fraudulent practices had existed before his arrival. In exchange for a reduced sentence, he coöperated with the government against his former superior, an Army captain, who recently pleaded guilty to similar charges.

“This is a cycle that goes through every year,” Judge Boyle said at the sentencing hearing. “When the new guy shows up, they say, Well, you can get a good meal over here and you can get, you know, a beer over here, and, by the way, you can pick up a quarter of a million dollars if you feel like it—we just run this operation.”

Similar cases involving fuel theft and Afghan contractors have been unearthed at other military bases in Afghanistan. “We’ve interviewed a lot of the people we’ve caught,” a law-enforcement official at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul told me. “One of the things they say is that the system is so loose, and it’s so obvious that you can get away with it.”

The Army’s Special Operations Command, when asked whether it was aware of systemic corruption within its logistics section on KAF, declined to comment. Its commander at the time, Lieutenant General Charles Cleveland, offered this statement to the court on the impact of the cases: “The majority of the Afghan population views the United States as one more in a long line of occupiers. When people they regularly do business with, in this case the Soldiers listed above, are exposed as thieves and conspirators, the established trust and respect is destroyed.”

In late December, the Justice Department filed criminal-conspiracy and bribery charges against Hikmat. A warrant was issued, though it’s unlikely that he’ll be arrested, since he spends his time in Dubai and Kabul. He and his lawyers have denied that he paid bribes or committed any illegal activities. In

court hearings, Hikmat’s lead counsel, Bryant Banes, has said that Hikmat was paid out of logistics funds for intelligence work for the Special Forces, and that classified evidence will exonerate him. Bradley has stated that he recruited Hikmat to be part of classified “compartmented programs.”

Bradley, Myers, and Woodall have not been accused of any wrongdoing or criminal acts, and they remain loyal to Hikmat. Woodall, who is now a major, wrote to me, “Hikmat is a friend to not only myself but to the American servicemen who operated in Afghanistan. To say differently is a disgrace.”

“I don’t want nothing else to do with Afghanistan,” Bradley told me, before refusing to comment. “Everything about it gets twisted into something wrong.” Myers also declined to speak. Both he and Bradley have retired from the Army. Myers has started a nonprofit, The World Is My Country Foundation. His Web campaigns have solicited funds for earthquake relief efforts in Nepal, and for him and his best friend to drive around the world, “helping people in every country we drive through.” According to his social-media posts, he plans to work on charitable campaigns with Hikmat in Afghanistan. The World Is My Country Foundation is registered as a nonprofit in Texas by Banes, Hikmat’s lawyer.

**L**AST MARCH, I visited Kandahar City. The fiery heat of summer was still a way off, and the air was mellow and dry. There were only ten thousand U.S.



soldiers left in Afghanistan, and, compared to the mad years of the surge, Kandahar felt quiet. The long lines of trucks waiting to enter KAF had vanished, and the economy was languishing without them.

Security conditions have continued to deteriorate. In September, Taliban fighters overran Kunduz, the country’s

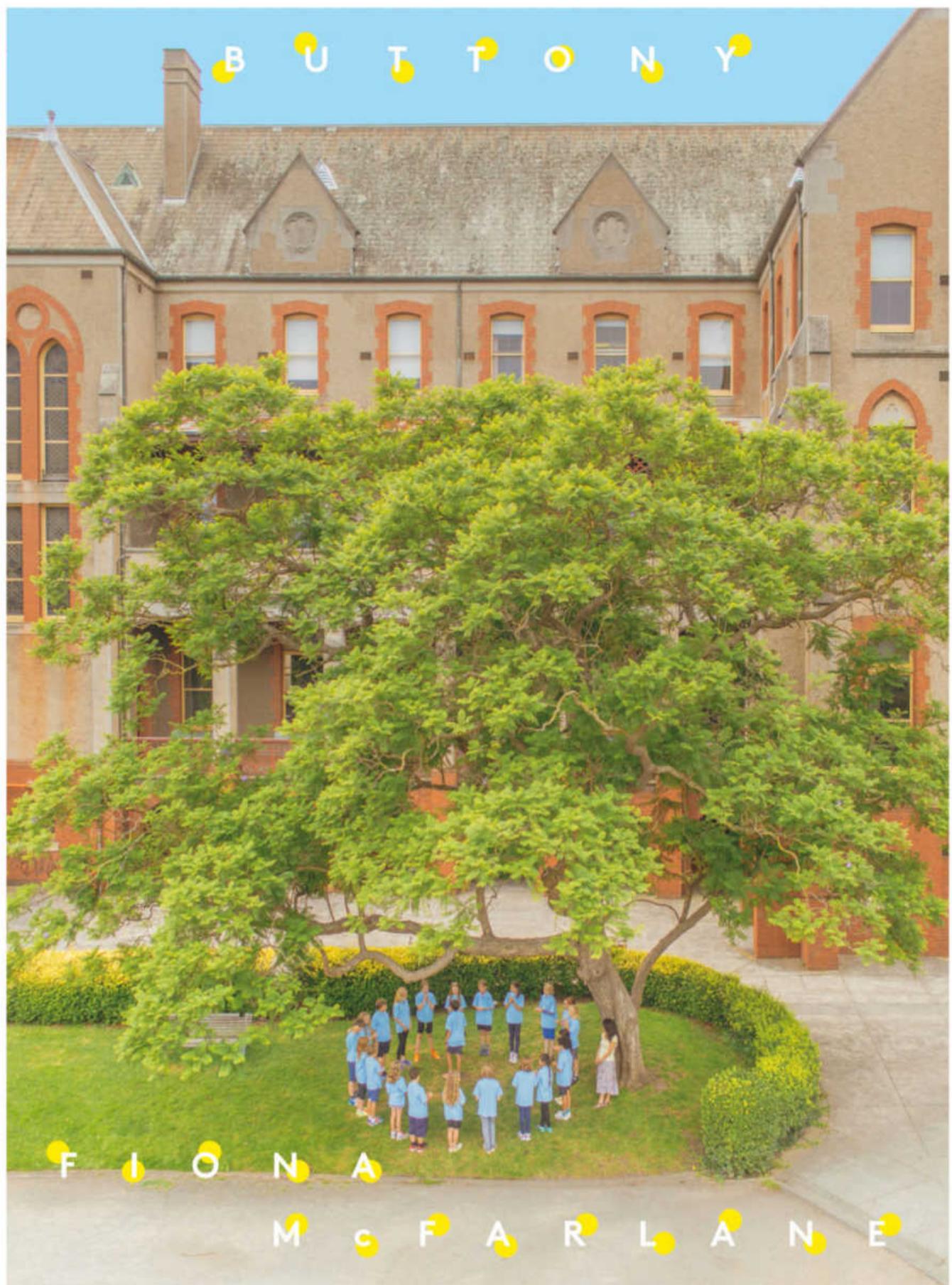
fifth-largest city, when the government forces collapsed in a day. After two weeks of fighting, Afghan special-operations troops, backed by American airpower, retook the city. A few days later, President Obama announced that he would extend the American troop deployment, into its fifteenth year, in order to shore up the Afghan government.

Within the U.S. government, there is growing recognition that America’s vast expenditures in Afghanistan have been self-defeating, and that the conflict is more complex than simply fighting the Taliban or terrorism. “The existential threat to the long-term viability of modern Afghanistan is corruption,” General John Allen, the former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, told Congress in 2014.

But, in a war waged by private contracting, the line between profit and profiteering can be hard to define. In Kandahar, I was told by many Afghans that the small thieves are caught so that the big thieves may go free. They believed that Hikmat had been singled out by the Americans because he lacked the political connections of rivals like the Sherzais. “It’s not only Hikmatullah Shadman—there were so many contractors that did the exact same thing that Shadman did,” Khalid Pashtoon, the member of parliament, said. “The only problem was that Shadman was captured.” He added, “Hikmat was like a milking cow: everybody tried to suck his milk.”

A Kandahari businessman used a different metaphor. “Hikmat was like a knight in chess,” he told me. “There were many people before and after Hikmat, far richer than him.” He said that he owned about a hundred trucks and had subcontracted for Hikmat and the other *awwalas* contractors on KAF. He also claimed that he had helped to sell stolen fuel on the black market, and had delivered the cash to soldiers working with the Special Forces unit at the airport. “The bottom line is the Americans were corrupt themselves.”

“The American money was benefitting everybody—the government and the Taliban,” Gul Agha Sherzai told me. There was, he said, an apt Pashto proverb about unintended consequences: “A rifle strikes from its barrel and its butt.” ♦



DESIGN BY ANNIE JEN

THE CHILDREN WANTED to play Buttony.

"All right," Miss Lewis said, and she clapped her hands five times, in the rhythm that meant they must be quiet and copy her. They were quiet and copied her.

"All right," she said, with that smile she reserved for the sleepy, silly mid-afternoon. "We'll play. Joseph, get the button." The children approved the justice of this appointment; that was apparent in the small, satisfied sigh they made together. They watched Joseph walk to Miss Lewis's desk. Joseph was a compact, deliberate boy, and his straight black hair fell to his shoulders. He wore his uniform in a way that seemed gentlemanly but at the same time casual. He was both kind and beautiful, and they loved him.

The button lay in a special tin in the right-hand corner of Miss Lewis's top drawer. The children listened for the sound this drawer made as Joseph opened it. They knew that the shifting sound of the drawer opening meant largesse—gold stars or stamps or, in exceptional cases, gummy frogs—and that Miss Lewis's bounty was capable of falling on them all, but fell perhaps more often on Joseph. Alternatively, the sound of the drawer opening meant Buttony.

All the children handled the button with reverence, but none more so than Joseph. He was gifted in solemnity. He had a processional walk and moved his head slowly when his name was called—and it was regularly called. His attention was made more valuable by its purposeful quality. He never leaned in confidentially to hear a secret; the other children came to his ear and whispered there. Miss Lewis liked to call on him in class just to see his measured face rise up out of that extraordinary hair. His beauty had startled her, until she'd met both parents—Vietnamese mother, Polish father—and then he'd seemed like the solution to something. When he held the yellow button out before him in the dish of his hands, Miss Lewis could forget the mustard-colored cardigan it had fallen off one winter day. The button was no longer limited by its cheap yellow plastic; it seemed to

pulse with life. The children looked at it, and at Joseph, without appearing to breathe. Miss Lewis wanted her children to live in a heightened way, and she encouraged this sort of ceremony.

"Close the drawer, Joseph," she said, because she found she liked nothing better, after admiring him, after giving him the opportunity to be admired, than to gently suggest a mundane task. Miss Lewis could close that drawer with her hip. Joseph used a shoulder. The sound of the drawer closing released the children. Now they hurried to line up at the door.

They always played Buttony outside.

"Quietly, quietly!" Miss Lewis scolded, brushing the tops of their heads as they filed past her into the corridor, led by Joseph and the button. She followed them out. In the next-door classroom, 3A recited times tables under the priestly monotone of Mr. Graham. The other side of the corridor shone with 5B's scaled depiction of the solar system. The children claimed to like blue Saturn best, with its luminous rings, but Miss Lewis was fond of Neptune. She always put out a finger to touch its smooth crayon surface as she passed.

They gathered under the jacaranda tree. The day was sweet and green. Miss Lewis leaned against the tree and crossed one ankle over the other. Her ankles were still slim; she wasn't so very old. The children formed a circle around Joseph, and there was something very natural about this, about Joseph being in the middle of a circle. Grave Joseph. He stood with the button as if at some kind of memorial service. Then he raised it to his lips and kissed it. No one had ever kissed the button before, and some of the other children raised their fingers to their lips. Miss Lewis pursed her mouth. One boy—she didn't see who—let out a brief scoff, but was ignored.

"Put out your hands," Miss Lewis said, and the children lifted their cupped hands.

"Close your eyes," Miss Lewis said, closing her own eyes. She was often so tired, in the midafternoon, that this handful of seconds in which to close her eyes seemed the true blessing of

Buttony. To stand under the jacaranda tree in the bright day and make darkness fall, and then to hear Joseph's voice. His eyes were open, of course. He made his way around the circle, and as he touched each set of hands he said, "Buttony."

"Buttony, Buttony," twenty-one times. Miss Lewis counted them out, and when he was finished—all twenty-one pairs of hands, because none of her children were absent that day, no one was sick or pretending to be—she opened her eyes. The children stood motionless in the circle, and now their hands were closed, each set clasped together, possibly holding the button. Joseph returned to the middle of the circle. He looked up at Miss Lewis and she looked at him, and it was as if, from inside that hair, he were acknowledging sorrow and solitude and fatigue, and also routine and expectation and quietness. And, because he was only a boy, trust. Miss Lewis nodded, and Joseph nodded back.

"Open your eyes," Miss Lewis said. She loved to see all her children open their eyes at once. They always smiled, as if relieved to see the light on the other side of their eyelids. They giggled and pressed their hands together, and looked at one another's hands, and looked at Joseph, and wondered who now had the button. Oh, that beautiful button: mustard-colored, Joseph-kissed. Round as a planet on one side, sharp as a kiss on the other. Joseph stood with his hands behind his back. His hair hung over his eyes. It was hard to puzzle Joseph out in Buttony. The children delayed for a fond moment, as if wanting to leave him alone with his secret a little longer. Miss Lewis surveyed the circle to see who was blushing, whose head was raised higher than usual, who was smiling at having been favored with the button. She also looked for the disconsolate signs of a child who was clearly buttonless.

"You start, Miranda," Miss Lewis said.

Miranda rubbed her right ear against her right shoulder. She swayed on one leg.

"Xin," she said. Xin produced a goofy smile. Then she opened her

hands: there was no button there.

"Blake," Xin said. Blake grinned and threw his empty hands over his head.

Blake said Miranda. Miranda said Josie. Josie said Osea. Osea said Ramon. Miss Lewis closed her eyes. She opened them again and thought, Jyoti. It took eleven more children to guess Jyoti. She was one of those girls you didn't suspect. Her socks slipped. She had a mole on her left cheek. It was like Joseph to have picked Jyoti. It was like Jyoti to stand burning invisibly in the circle, hardly able to believe her luck. Her hands unfolded, and there was the button. The other children craned to look. For a moment, they loved her. For a moment, she held Joseph's kiss in her hands. She stepped into the middle of the circle, and Joseph took her place. She raised the button to her lips, but didn't kiss it.

"Hands out, eyes closed," Miss Lewis said, and darkness fell. "Don't forget, Jyoti. No giving the button to the person who was just it. Don't give the button to Joseph."

It was necessary to remind the children of this rule at the beginning of every game; otherwise, they were capable of handing the button over to Joseph at any opportunity. As it was, Jyoti picked Archie, and Archie picked Joseph. Joseph picked Mimi, who picked Miranda, who picked Joseph.

The afternoon grew brighter. Planes flew overhead in all directions. The jacaranda dropped its spring flowers. Every now and then, Miss Lewis saw faces at the windows of classrooms, as other children looked out to see them playing Buttony. How long had they been playing now? These children could spend the whole afternoon hoping to be chosen by Joseph. They would never tire of it. Joseph picked Ruby, picked Ramon, picked Joseph, picked Liam S., picked Liam M., picked Joseph. Joseph said, "Buttony, Buttony, Buttony" twenty-one times. Miss Lewis closed her eyes and kept them closed when she said, "Open your eyes." The children, in turn, said, "Buttony, Buttony, Buttony." She uncrossed her ankles and crossed them again and thought, Every day could pass like this, quite easily. Every day could be sweet and green with the jacaranda

and the children and the sun and the planes. And then, at the end of them all, the sweet days and the children, would you open your eyes? Would your hands fall open?

Would they be empty?

Miss Lewis looked. Joseph stood in the circle.

"Hands out, close your eyes," she said, and the children obeyed. They bent their heads as if praying. She was moved by the tenderness she saw come over each of them. They were like children in a fairy tale, under a spell.

She looked at Joseph, and he was watching her, so she nodded at him. His face was impassive. He made her think of a Swiss Guard at the Vatican. He received her nod by beginning to walk around the circle, and each hand he touched trembled, and the children lowered their heads still further as he passed them. Their hands closed like sea anemones. Joseph hadn't yet given away the button. Fifteen, nineteen, twenty-one times he said, "Buttony." Then he raised his neutral face and looked at Miss Lewis and opened his mouth and placed the button inside it. The button made no indentation in his cheek. Miss Lewis crossed her arms. You will solve this, she thought, and suffer for it. Joseph blinked inside his hair.

"Open your eyes," Miss Lewis said. The children lifted their heads into the burden of their love for Joseph. They smiled and squirmed and began to guess: Phoebe, Ruby, Usha, Archie, Blake. Joseph turned toward every name as it was called, as if waiting to see who might produce the button. Liam S., Bella, Jackson, Xin. Twenty names, and twenty hands falling open. Only Jyoti remained. She stood with her rigid hands, with her desperate smile, with her socks slipping. No one wanted to say her name. They wanted her to give herself up. Miss Lewis, too, wanted Jyoti to give herself up. Eventually, Ramon said, "Jyoti." Jyoti opened her empty hands.

The circle laughed. Miss Lewis had found that children, as a rule, didn't like practical jokes. There was a certain kind of laughter that, in children, was a howl. Ramon took Jyoti's wrists and inspected her hands. No one looked at Joseph, but they all saw Jyoti:

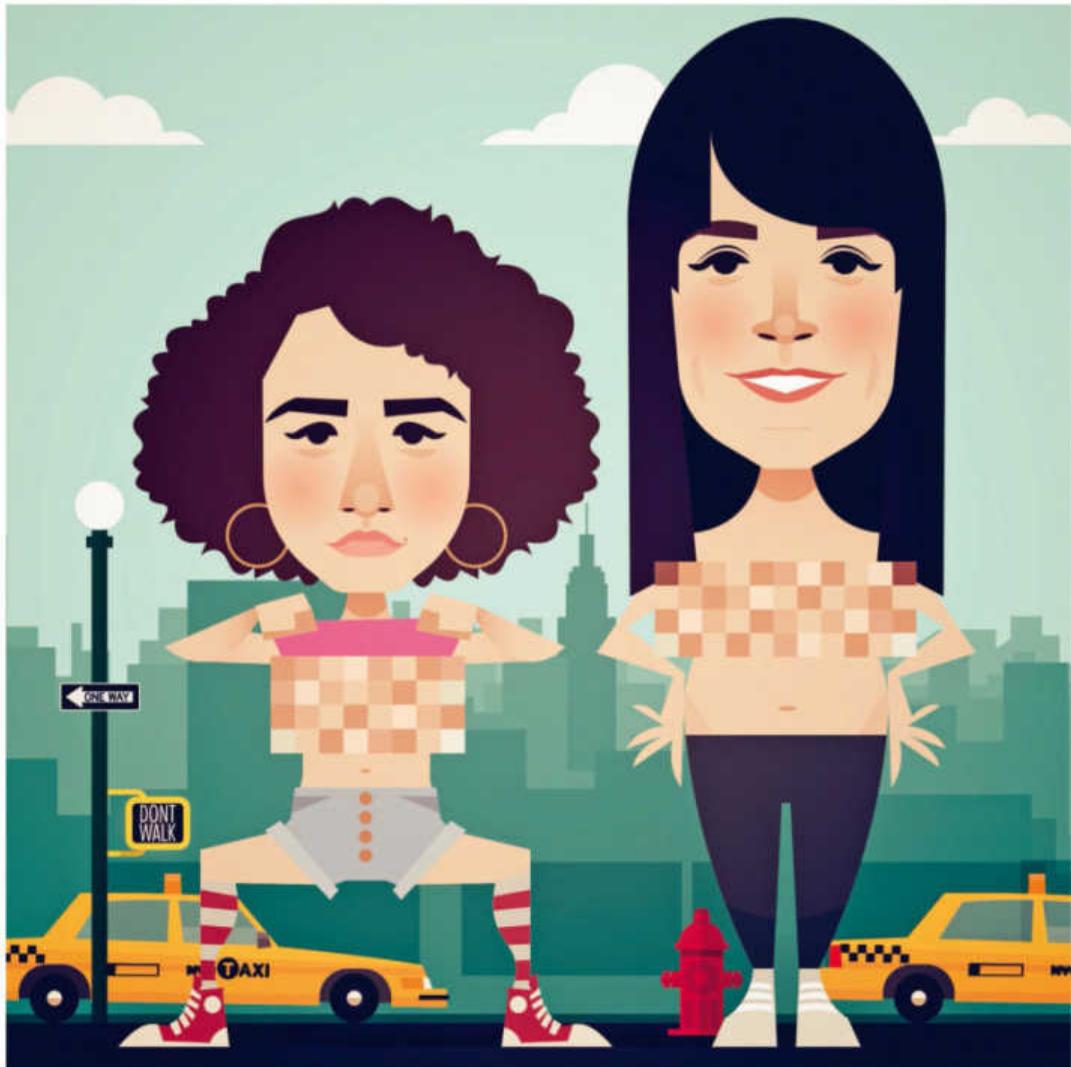
the mole on her cheek, the dusty mark where she'd rubbed her shin with the heel of her shoe, the crookedness of her teeth. Jyoti might have been crying. Ramon threw her wrists down as if discarding them. Then all the children save Joseph and Jyoti began to cry out, just as they'd done when they wanted to play Buttony. They stamped their feet and kicked at the grass. They shook their uniforms and looked up into the branches of the jacaranda tree, as if they might find the button there. The circle broke open as they shook and kicked and shouted, and faces appeared again in classroom windows.

Miss Lewis watched Joseph stand there with his mouth closed and his hands behind his back. Although the circle had broken, he seemed still to be in the middle of it. He was only a boy, and he was alone and proud and terrible. Miss Lewis stepped away from the tree. She would order him to open his mouth and spit out the button. She would make him say what he had done, how he had stood and watched the children guess; she would shame him, and the faces in the windows would see it. But first she must settle the children. She clapped her hands five times in the rhythm that meant they must be quiet and copy her. They were quiet, but they didn't copy her. She saw the way they looked at her; she saw their fury.

Ramon came first, to pull at her pockets. Then Josie, who had lost a tooth that morning; her mouth was open as she searched the grass at Miss Lewis's feet. Osea and Mimi scratched at the scabbed bark of the tree. Miss Lewis swatted and slapped, but the children still came. They opened her hands and dug in her elbows. Liam S. squatted to peer up her skirt, and when she crouched to stop him it was Jyoti who pulled the pins from her hair, as if the button might be hidden in its roots. Now Miss Lewis cried out. She lifted her head and saw 3A's Mr. Graham running toward her. And Joseph was behind him, not quite running, not altogether, but like a shadow, long and blank and beautiful. ♦

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# THE CRITICS



ON TELEVISION

## LAVERNE & CURLY

*The slapstick anarchists of "Broad City."*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

A STONER COMEDY ABOUT two woke girls, created by the best friends Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, "Broad City" launched, in 2009, as a set of shaggy, self-produced Web sketches. In 2014, it evolved into a confident sitcom débüt on Comedy Central, produced by Amy Poehler. From the start, the show attracted blazing devotees.

Two years ago, when Jacobson and Glazer performed at the Bell House, in Brooklyn, the crowd around me was screaming as if we were at a Beatles concert, which maybe we were. In a post-"*Louie*" world, in which all the best sitcoms deal in melancholy and rage, "*Broad City*" offers something zany, warmhearted, and sweetly liber-

atory, like a piñata spilling out Red Hots, Plan B, and pot snickerdoodles.

In the grand TV-sitcom tradition, Jacobson and Glazer play less driven, less competent versions of their younger selves. Abbi is a klutzy romantic with a dead-end job, mopping up pubic hair at a health club called Soulstice and mooning after dudes in man buns. Ilana

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is a horndog narcissist who torments her co-workers at a Groupon-like Internet startup called Deals Deals Deals. One of the girls lives in Queens, the other in Brooklyn, but they're glued together in ways that anyone who has been in one of those friendships might recognize: they text non-stop, Skype during sex (well, Ilana does), smoke up, cheerlead, and justify each other's grossest mistakes. The first season was pretty much perfect, the second more hit-and-miss; but the first three episodes of the new season are solid. They also raise the stakes, slightly, when Abbi scores a longed-for promotion to trainer, while Ilana gets promoted—and then almost immediately canned, after she tweets out a viral bestiality video. (A well-intentioned one! She was trying to advertise a deal on colonics.)

The show nails the texture of modern New York, from the breastfeeding crone who rules the food co-op (a fantastic cameo by Melissa Leo) to the needlessly bitchy sorority girl in line at a Williamsburg bakery. But even when its characters fail epically, as they often do, the show feels optimistic, a daydream of two goofy slobs pinballing through life, every obstacle they meet just something new to ricochet off.

While "Broad City" is often praised for its warm portrait of friendship and sexual frankness, the spine of the show is genius slapstick. The first new episode tosses three axes in the air in the intro—a split-screen montage, showing a year of intimate bathroom gags—and then keeps juggling, offering up seven increasingly elaborate sequences of physical comedy. In the first act, Abbi is pulled, chest first, into a sewer grating; a pop-up sale turns into a riot; and Ilana gets her bicycle chain locked around her waist. The second act is an elegant two-step sequence, in which Abbi, desperate to pee, sneaks into a construction site's porta-potty, which is then pulled up into the air by a crane—and when she escapes, gasping in relief, Ilana, who is wearing that bicycle chain, gets hooked onto the back of a bread truck, which drives off. The whole bit is perfectly timed and edited, down to the punch line: when Abbi runs over to bawl out the truck driver, she finds him watching porn as he drives. "Nice ass!" he screams as she

walks away. "I know!" she yells back, in exasperation.

Later, Ilana gets magnetized to a giant set of dangling metal testicles at an art exhibit. It's the kind of lunatic image the show specializes in, an echo of classic comedy, like the disembodied nose in Woody Allen's "Sleeper." And while it works as a literal payoff to Ilana's rants about being trapped by patriarchy, it's also satisfying as raw comedy physics; even after Abbi rescues Ilana, she keeps trying to balance the balls, adjusting a spiky pubic hair—a good citizen to the end.

**O**N A RECENT podcast with the critic Andy Greenwald, Glazer described the show's premise as "vulnerability is strength." Out of context, that might sound gooey, but it reveals something about "Broad City's" compassionate take on shit and sex, its insistence that bodies out of control are hilarious and lovely, not dirty and grotesque. Jacobson and Glazer's take on identity politics—and their characters' well-intentioned but barely informed fourth-wave, queerish, anti-rape/pro-porn intersectional feminism—is a more intricate matter, both a part of the show's philosophy and a subject of its satire. When it comes to race, the series has had a particularly complicated arc, stretching back to the Web sketches, which included a loving homage to "Do the Right Thing," with Abbi and Ilana punching the air like Rosie Perez.

Visually, and in terms of their friendships, the world of "Broad City" is racially inclusive. For a while, this diversity was regularly used as a snotty wedge against HBO's "Girls," as if Abbi and Ilana were the pure Elizabeth Warren to Lena Dunham's tainted Hillary Clinton. But, in fact, Abbi and Ilana, just like Hannah Horvath, aren't generic young women: they're college-educated white kids from the Northeast, artsy urbanites who aren't rich but also aren't poor, even if they can't afford much. They're also secular Jews in a way that network sitcoms never allowed characters to be, in the nineties, when "Seinfeld," "Friends," and "Mad About You" smooshed New Yorkers into an ethnically vanilla, network-friendly neutrality.

Like many people in this demographic, the characters on "Broad City"

are deeply into hip-hop. This is particularly true of the fictional Ilana, who dates a black guy, Lincoln (Hannibal Buress), a supremely chill dentist. ("Hey, bwah," she says when she calls him. "Hey, grah," he replies.) But Ilana's not just a girl with a diverse social circle, a taste for Lil Wayne, and graphic fantasies about Rihanna backstage at the Barclays Center. She's legitimately obsessed with the notion of herself as a bi-poly-cross-ethnic sexual adventurer; at times, she seems to believe that she's not white, accusing her boss, say, of white privilege. When she hooks up with a doppelgänger (played by the Glazer doppelgänger Alia Shawkat), Ilana explains that, in bed, she craves difference: "Different colors, different shapes, different sizes. People who are hotter, uglier. More smart; *not* more smart. Innies, outies! I don't know, a Catholic person." It's a mixture of idealism and solipsism that reminded me of a German ex of mine, who insisted on calling himself "a citizen of the verld."

In real life, a white woman like this might be a nightmare of cultural appropriation, screaming "Bow down, bitches!" and tweeting hot takes on Black Lives Matter which she's barely skimmed. Ilana's fascination with blackness has a warmer feeling, in part because she is such an awed true believer when it comes to her heroines: as Oprah is to Liz Lemon, Nicki Minaj is to Ilana. Still, the show has always had a tricky undercurrent—the risk of finding something intrinsically funny about white people talking like black people—and it's an issue that has intensified as the national conversation has shifted around it. (The fictional Abbi expresses this worry, in a perfect modern koan. "You're so anti-racist, sometimes, that you're actually really racist," she tells Ilana.) Last season, some viewers were put off when Ilana's ridiculously elaborate masturbation ritual included pulling on big gold-hoop earrings that read, in lacy script, "Latina." Who was that joke on? And who got to make it?

This season, rather than skirt the subject, the show steers straight into it, starting with a sly gag that involves Ilana imitating foreigners, from Ital-

ians to Germans. "Do Chinese!" Abbi says. Ilana stares back, knowingly: "It's 2016, dude." This becomes the rich theme of the second episode, when Ilana asks Abbi to impersonate her for her co-op shift. Abbi's version of Ilana, it turns out, is hysterically crude and offensive, like Ilana seen through the eyes of her meanest Internet enemy: in a mesh crop top and those "Latina"

earrings, Abbi-as-Ilana squeezes her breasts, howls "Rape culture sucks!", and moans "Yaaas!" When a white woman assigns her to clean the bathroom, Abbi-as-Ilana explains earnestly that she and the woman are "queens" and should not be "in the back

of the bus, cleaning up white dudes' dreadlocks, ja feel?"

It's a provocative, unsettling routine that hits from multiple angles. There's Abbi's surprisingly harsh view of her friend. (Ilana isn't any better at doing Abbi: she mewls, "Hi. I'm Abbi. I love pugs. My fahmily comes from a long line of Colonial Jews.") The bit mocks white women, like Ilana, who glom on to black politics. And it suggests a cathartic, ongoing wrestling match with the show's own tricksy position, drawing a line between this coarse and manipulative Ilana and the endearing hustler whom fans love. It's the type of meta-comedy that TV sitcoms often experiment with once they are no longer novelties, when the creators have begun to engage, consciously or unconsciously, in a conversation with viewers' responses.

All of which would be self-indulgent if it weren't for the fact that the episode is non-stop funny. The clever dialogue revs it up, but the jokes click in because of the sheer anarchic strangeness of Jacobson's performance, as she masturbates an eggplant and falls backward into a display of bulk beans, mid-twerk. The show's secret engine, however, may be its willingness to tiptoe close to failure. There's an argument that any critique of comedy is a joke-killer. But great comedians don't fold and sulk when people raise questions—they just make better bits and bolder, more ambitious jokes. Vulnerability is strength! And a nervous laugh is also a laugh, after all. ♦



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## SAYS YOU

*How to be a critic in an age of opinion.*

BY NATHAN HELLER



*In "Better Living Through Criticism," A. O. Scott ponders the purpose of his craft.*

**I**N THE SPRING of 1946, George Orwell, writing in the London *Tribune*, opened with a view from underneath the rock:

In a cold but stuffy bed-sitting room littered with cigarette ends and half-empty cups of tea, a man in a moth-eaten dressing-gown sits at a rickety table, trying to find room for his typewriter among the piles of dusty papers that surround it. He cannot throw the papers away because the wastepaper basket is already overflowing, and besides, somewhere among the unanswered letters and unpaid bills it is possible that there is a cheque for two guineas which he is nearly certain he forgot to pay into the bank. . . .

Half hidden among the pile of papers is a bulky parcel containing five volumes which his editor has sent with a note suggesting that they "ought to go well together." They arrived four days ago, but for 48 hours the reviewer was

prevented by moral paralysis from opening the parcel. Yesterday in a resolute moment he ripped the string off it and found the five volumes to be *Palestine at the Cross Roads*, *Scientific Dairy Farming*, *A Short History of European Democracy* (this one is 680 pages and weighs four pounds), *Tribal Customs in Portuguese East Africa*, and a novel, *It's Nicer Lying Down*, probably included by mistake.

Orwell had just published "Animal Farm," written while he was working as a critic. It was, perhaps, the most prolific period of his career: from 1943 to 1944 alone, he reviewed more than eighty books for the *Tribune*. Yet those efforts must now rank among his least-read work. "The prolonged, indiscriminate reviewing of books is a quite exceptionally thankless, irritating and exhausting job," he wrote in the same essay. No

honest hack could compose so quickly and from such weak grounding without shame. Orwell's consolation, as a literary critic, was that he could have been something worse. "Everyone in this world has someone else whom he can look down on," he explained, "and I must say, from experience of both trades, that the book reviewer is better off than the film critic, who cannot even do his work at home."

Self-hating scribes have never been in short supply. But self-hating critics—writers who, like Orwell's hack, sample new art and issue judgments for a buck—have always seemed to inhabit their fifth circle with special chagrin, scurrying out to work, then sliding back to states of existential loathing like newts seeking refuge in a swamp. "I can't name three first-rate literary critics in the United States," Gore Vidal, who worked as one constantly, said. In recent years, film reviewers have increasingly been turned out among the ranks of the unemployed. Everybody likes a movie critic; no one, it seems, needs one. If you went to see the new "Star Wars" installment, it probably wasn't because of the writeup in your Thursday paper. If your local critic cast a no vote on "Carol," you could find a friend to set you straight. Even friendless people can use Google. Run an online search, and you will tumble down a wishing well of user comments, aggregated user comments, and blogs by tax accountants with free evenings.

What's the point of a reviewer in an age when everyone reviews? A common defense of the endeavor centers on three qualities: expertise, eloquence, and attention. Critics have essential skills that Blogging Bob does not. They know more. They are decent writers, who can give a fair encapsulation of a work and detail their responses. And they're focussed: since their job is studying and explaining the object at hand, they are especially alert to its nuances.

This case, unfortunately, doesn't hold up in the age of Yelp. Professional critics are knowledgeable, sure. But amateurs are hardly less so: film buffs have enjoyed easy access to their canon since the V.H.S. era. Reviewers write with skill, but so do lots of tax-accountant bloggers. And the claim that critics bring unique attention to their work seems inattentive to the tenor of an age that

brings us Genius (an open online tool for annotating pop lyrics and other vital cultural texts in the manner of “The Norton Shakespeare”) and what’s been called “recap culture” (a redoubt of erstwhile English majors poring over last night’s TV in a flutter of summary, analysis, cross-analysis, and intertextual concordance). We’ve reached peak criticism; a peacock spread of hermeneutic attention has become our basic greeting for creative work. What are the professionals doing for us today?

**S**INCE JOINING THE *Times*, as a film critic, in 2000, A. O. Scott has come to lead what sometimes seems the earth’s last sovereign generation of mainstream reviewers. In the daily paper, he’s a virtuoso of the short-form judgment, turning out work that’s insightful, unfussy, and pyrite-flecked with bons mots. Sometimes he writes essays about broader topics in the arts, and those are usually some of the *Times*’ best weekend reading. In his first book, “Better Living Through Criticism” (Penguin Press)—a title to stir every Jewish mother’s heart!—Scott works to make a case for his embattled craft. He probes its past; he states his goals. He wonders, “Will it sound defensive or pretentious if I say that criticism is an art in its own right?”

It does sound a little defensive, though one understands the impulse. When Duke Ellington composed “The Queen’s Suite,” he was working from the blank page; he brought a previously unimagined musical offering into the world. Orwell’s hack, by contrast, produces his review by standing shakily on other works. Critics justifying their trade like to say that the judgment aspect of the job—the thumbs-up or thumbs-down—is the least interesting part: really, they just love movies or whatever it is they review. This sounds a little like a butcher claiming to have gone into the meat-slicing business because he likes working with animals. It is possible to honor and enjoy new work without grading and dissecting it. That is how many people live.

Scott recalls that he faced accusations of bad faith in writing about “The Avengers,” in the spring of 2012. He didn’t hate the movie, but he was irked by what he saw as its overprocessed,

profit-seeking slickness. When the review appeared, Samuel L. Jackson, one of the film’s many stars, singled him out on Twitter (“AO Scott needs a new job! . . . One he can ACTUALLY do!”), and fans piled on. “The Avengers” went on to be one of the fastest movies ever to gross a billion dollars.

What valuable function did Scott’s review serve in this case? It certainly didn’t talk moviegoers out of seeing or enjoying the film. It didn’t persuade the film’s producers to change course. (There was a sequel.) What such reviews do, he suggests in his book, is to contribute to a climate in which creative work is taken seriously, and thus dignified as a pursuit. “It is my contention here that criticism, far from sapping the vitality of art, is instead what supplies its lifeblood; that criticism, properly understood, is not an enemy from which art must be defended, but rather another name—the proper name—for the defense of art itself,” he writes. Criticism sets a standard that artists can strive for or resist, he says, echoing an old defense by the poet-critic Matthew Arnold. According to Scott, “A work of art is itself a piece of criticism.”

Criticism is art; art is criticism. A critic might point out that neither term means much without a good definition. The short-form book reviewing that Michiko Kakutani does at the *Times* has a purpose different from that of Alfred Kazin’s historical arguments in “On Native Grounds” or of William K. Wimsatt’s scholarly work on Samuel Johnson’s prose. Yet all these pursuits are known as criticism, and Scott approaches such genres largely indiscriminately. His sense of “art,” which would seem to include everything from Marina Abramović to “WALL-E,” assumes a gaping straddle, too. The challenge facing “Better Living Through Criticism” is not just to defend his craft’s strengths but to define its limits.

Scott is qualified for this task. He was brought up by two humanities professors, and he was a book critic before taking his film-reviewing job at the *Times*. He has an easy, avid knowledge of the Western canon; his book scarcely addresses movies, and occasionally reads like fragments from lectures delivered at one of our great universities. (Scott has taught at Wesleyan.) “Better Liv-

ing Through Criticism” is clearly a labor of love from someone who thinks deeply about his work and wants to pass along the flame. That said, it’s a mess of a book, fuzzy, disorganized, and maddeningly undirected. Scott presents himself as a warrior against naysayers, but his central claim—that adept critics strengthen the culture of art—isn’t actually contentious. What’s subject to debate is more specific: who’s adept, where these people get their taste, and why we trust that they will lead us through a landscape we can’t see.

**B**EYOND INSTITUTIONAL affiliation, critics usually gain authority in three ways. They can be first responders: if they called the genius of Patti Smith before she was Patti Smith, their taste in other new music is probably of note. They can be scholars: someone who knows the canon backward and forward seems a sound gatekeeper for esteem. Or they can be seducers: they’ve wooed and won you with their work; you follow them because you like the way they think. The trouble is that each virtue is unreliable, and almost nobody fully embodies all three. We give critics broad mandates, and they’re constantly betraying our trust.

A major problem is the steep, shadowy presence of posterity. People arrive in history at once late and early; they rely on critics to help them see beyond their time. We can be grateful for the first responder who says that an unknown artist is going places—that critic’s gift is to cast out ahead of her era. We can defer to the scholar who suggests that J. K. Rowling is no C. S. Lewis. Yet reviewing also reflects an era’s biases and blindnesses; even food writers’ tastes shift with the times. (One wonders what Craig Claiborne, the postwar *Times* critic with a soft spot for foreign fare and fried chicken, would have made of upstate kale and melon foam.) Reviewers are supposed to give us bird’s-eye guidance, but they, too, live within the garden maze.

And so the history of criticism, as Scott notices, is filled with bad verdicts. “It is impossible to enumerate all the important literary works which were ignored, jeered at, or savagely slashed by critics in the nineteenth century, ‘the age of criticism,’ ” the Yale

French professor Henri Peyre observed, in a delightful diatribe from 1944. When “Moby-Dick” came out, it was called “trash.” Jane Austen went largely unnoticed, and, in 1857, a reviewer at *Le Figaro* bluntly dismissed a début novelist: “*M. Flaubert n'est pas un écrivain*” (“Flaubert is not a writer”). The book under review was “Madame Bovary.” Take a look, Peyre wrote, and you will find that criticism has rarely accomplished even its most basic mission of identifying and supporting important work. “Keats was not killed by a few venomous reviews; but is it unreasonable to suppose that a little more recognition would have encouraged him to write more poetry in the last year of his life?” he asks. Why persist in such a cruel pursuit with such bad odds?

Peyre was obviously being selective. Our beatitudinal myth of posterity—blessed are the unknown geniuses, for they shall be super-famous after they die—is a canard. We like to hear that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Zora Neale Hurston were buried in unmarked graves, but Mozart was celebrated all his life, and Hurston was on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*, the mainstay of her era’s newsstand. Criticism, for that matter, can sin in generosity as well. In 1959, Elizabeth Hardwick published a famous broadside in *Har-*

*per’s* lamenting treachy book reviews. “A genius may indeed go to his grave unread, but he will hardly have gone to it unpraised,” she wrote. “A universal, if somewhat lobotomized, accommodation reigns.”

Hardwick was pushing back against complaints from the Romantics and their sympathizers, such as Peyre, who might have bridled at her harshness but who shared her feeling that something was fishy in the business of reviewing. Career critics are siloed, Peyre pointed out. They’re led alone into hermetic rooms; fed a stream of new work, to be digested cold; and told to publish whatever they happen to think, a role that sets them up to look ridiculous. Overworked, Orwellian reviewers were not necessarily wrong to hate themselves, but the problem was endemic; it emerged from the professionalization of the reviewer job. Peyre’s solution was to bring in academics. He imagined reviewers and the professoriat joining forces and elevating each other in their voices and their knowledge. His ambitions were vast; revisiting the topic in the late sixties, he imagined literary reviews funded in the manner of space research. “The benefit to American culture, to American prestige, and—the word is not too big—to mankind would be

immense,” he wrote. Confoundingly, the funds have yet to arrive. For now, the job of criticism still sits on earth, with all its imperfections.

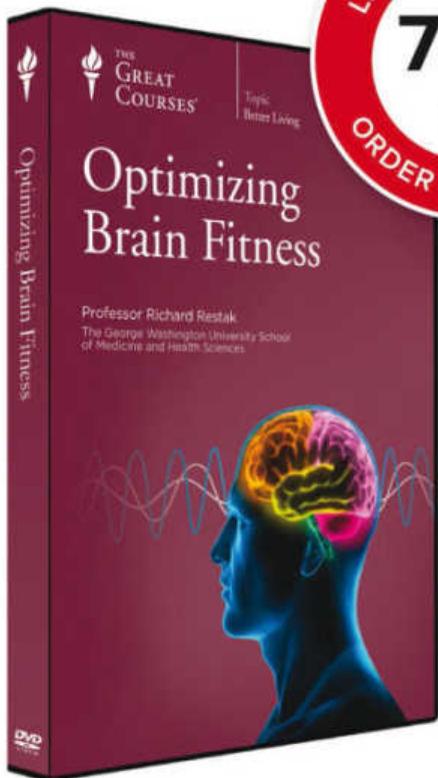
MUCH OF “Better Living Through Criticism” finds Scott looking in the mirror, and he is not always happy with what he sees. (In one of the book’s more entertaining tangents, he caricatures himself as “a Gen-X baby in the throes of middle age, flailing between the Kübler-Ross stages of denial and acceptance.”) The generalized crisis of criticism becomes, at various points, personal. Scott is self-conscious about his authority as a critic, and uneasy about the mechanism by which his taste becomes a judgment. He cites the pipsqueak voice, in “Monty Python’s Life of Brian,” who answers a crowd chanting “I am an individual!” with the words “I’m not.” Like that character, he says, critics must not claim to represent the universal public. But they also shouldn’t become knee-jerk contrarians against mainstream taste. In the long run, he suggests, nobody is anything more than “another voice in the chorus.” His solution to the authority problem is to emphasize that it is out of his control.

Pointing toward interesting problems and promptly running away is a regrettable tendency of “Better Living Through Criticism.” To the extent that the book has a structure, it resembles a Rubik’s cube that has not been solved. The components of a cumulative argument exist, but they are broken up and scattered randomly throughout the book. We had been reading about the individual-universal paradox more than a hundred pages before the Monty Python line cropped up, but that first discussion ended inconclusively, and is never resolved. When we encounter a lengthy explanation of formalism, near the end of the book, we realize that it might have been useful near the beginning, where Scott worked to pinpoint the ideas questioned in Marina Abramović’s art.

Between these squares are other squares, many interesting. We are taken on a tour of ways that the great minds have framed the work of criticism, which is helpful. (Professor Scott’s reading list is superb.) We receive wildly abstracted ruminations on the nature of the craft,



“I’m having my entrails read.”



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which are less so. (“Hard cases have a way of multiplying, until the boundaries become invisible where once they had seemed obvious, and what had looked like empirically grounded definitions turn out to have been airy suppositions all along.”) When the going gets tough, Scott has a tendency to bow before the mysteries of the universe. “There are so many ways to go wrong!” he writes:

You can celebrate artifice—the brilliant ways a thing can seem to know just what it is—or you embrace authenticity, the mute sublimity of a thing just being itself. You can regard it with cool, self-contained skepticism or embrace it with heedless ardor. You can walk carefully in the footsteps of moderation and responsibility, staying within a few standard deviations of the conventional wisdom, or you can wave the bright flag of opposition. You can be earnest or flippant, plainspoken or baroque, blunt or coy, dilettante or geek. You can follow the precepts of theory or just go on your nerve. You can labor to be consistent or blithely and capacious contradictions.

Readers might hope that Scott will lead them through these perils. But he doesn’t. “Every good critic, every interesting critic, will commit some of the crimes enumerated above, whether brazenly or unwittingly,” he concludes. “A great critic will be guilty of all of them.” Is this provocation or evasion? A book without centering characters or stories is like a ski run down the virgin face of a mountain: it’s thrilling to watch a master zigzag through the landscape, but, if the turns aren’t sharp and well judged, he goes nowhere at alarming speed. Scott is often less Roger Moore on the slopes in “A View to a Kill” than Chevy Chase on his saucer sled in “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation.” You want to see where he goes with it, but you also want to get out of the way.

The paradoxes keep coming, page after page after page. One of the ailments of our hermeneutic age is an overemphasis on “tensions”—as if noting problems excused us from having to follow them through—and Scott is not immune. He is much taken by what he calls the “internal antagonism” of critical judgment, caught between id and superego, scold and saint. No one should trust a sour, fault-seeking critic, but even worse is a smiling enthusiast who sends you to lame films

because he thinks it’s cruel to dismiss other people’s work. Hitting the sweet spot between them is the hard part. It demands more than just an interpretive reflex; it requires a standard for case-by-case evaluation. The boldest tastemakers among the scholar-critics sometimes solve the problem by working up big ideas—overarching theories of quality that govern their evaluations, regardless of what the public, and perhaps even their own private affinity, favors. (F. R. Leavis and Clement Greenberg displayed this mode at its most strident.) The trouble with this approach is that the criticism is useful only as far as the theory holds; its practitioners tend to fall out of touch as art, inevitably, alters its premises. Another group of reviewers solves the problem differently, by eliciting authority from readers rather than by claiming it. This third kind of critic, the seducer, is in some ways the most revealing of them all.

**S**EDUCERS ARE RARELY hung up on posterity or on their own self-justifying theories. They’re about evaluating in the now and showing you a good time tonight, baby. If Scott’s *Times* work didn’t already mark him as one of these, it would be apparent in how lightly he frets about his record. (“The only genuinely helpful guide to the practice of criticism would be a compendium of error and misdirection,” he writes, amiably.) Some people describe newspaper reviewing as “improvisational” criticism; you respond to what you see without the distraction of special preparation or theoretical commitments. A writer who can do that with charisma and insight, again and again, is a marvel. That is why it doesn’t much matter that “Better Living Through Criticism” is more slalom than argument. Building unified theories is not Scott’s job.

Why do we follow him, then? Scott did not go to film school. He has not made any movies. He may or may not have a detailed knowledge of the complete œuvre of Claude Chabrol. His powers of suasion come from his ability to make you feel that his experience was, or will be, yours. What the first responder and the scholar demand from us—“Defer to me; I see more than you do”—we give voluntarily to

the seducer, who woos our consent. Possibly, this is why the “Avengers” misadventure so flustered Scott. We need not agree with every move a seducer makes—far from it—but the moment we decide that we’re no longer cool with this arrangement is the moment when authority disappears.

What criticism shares with art, in other words, is a particular kind of magic: an exchange through which we transfer our attention and our trust to a different imagination, hoping that, by some transfiguration on the page, another person may begin to speak our minds. It’s not something we do for Amazonians or Yelpers, whom we trust only in numbers. And it grants an authority of judgment that recappers cannot claim.

When that authority comes, the bond is strong. Scott, like many professional writers, thinks that he is valued for his “voice.” “Criticism is not a matter of technique or form so much as it is a matter of personality,” he says in one of four long Q. & A.s, addressing questions from an imagined interviewer. He isn’t wrong, and yet Blogging Bob also has a charming personality in prose. The thrill we get, in work like Scott’s, is more specific to the medium. Reading Scott on “Magic Mike XXL” is knowing that a lot of other people are doing the same that morning, possibly grinning at the same lines (“You can take the dude out of the dance, but you can’t take the dance out of the dude”). Through reading his reviews, we find our place in a group of strangers brought together on that day; he doesn’t speak for the opinions of humanity, but he speaks to *us*, the people who have given him consent.

These convergences of audience around some lines of text in time are precious on news desks, and they’re rarer still in the reviewy blogosphere. But they happen regularly in the culture pages, when a beloved critic drops a high-profile piece. This is why publications that fire their critics shortchange themselves: making a shared event of writing is the one thing that print, unlike the constant pooling of Web commentary, still does best. We read, and often resist. But we take pleasure in the moments when the critic leads and gives us voice. We may even be glad to acquiesce. Sometimes it’s nicer lying down. ♦

# CAN YOU KEEP A SECRET?

*The former C.I.A. chief Michael Hayden on torture and transparency.*

BY GEORGE PACKER



**S**PYMASTERS ARE SUPPOSED to be good at keeping their mouths shut, so it's striking how many heads of the Central Intelligence Agency have published memoirs. Just in the years since September 11th, three former directors—George Tenet, Leon Panetta, and now Michael V. Hayden—have felt compelled to tell tales. (A fourth, David Petraeus, coöperated with his biographer so fully that he provided her with classified information.) They are no doubt driven by the same motives that lead other public figures to write autobiographies—money, narcissism, score-settling, concern for their place in history. Spooks in general have had a lot to answer for in the past decade and a half: the 9/11 attacks themselves, Iraq's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction, secret prisons, torture, warrantless eavesdropping, the bulk collection of Americans' data, and targeted

killings. On the inside, they hold their breath for years; once outside, they won't shut up. Within the limits set by the C.I.A.'s Publications Review Board, silence is an easy code to break.

Hayden was an Air Force officer who retired as a four-star general. He spent just about his whole career as an intelligence officer—providing intelligence to B-52 pilots in Vietnam, serving as chief of intelligence for U.S. forces in Europe during the Bosnian war, and then running the Air Intelligence Agency. In 1999, Hayden was appointed to lead the National Security Agency. He had the right résumé—all N.S.A. directors are senior military officers—as well as the luck of timing and circumstance that so often determines who gets the coveted jobs in government. But the director of the C.I.A.—a position Hayden held from 2006 to the start of the Obama Admin-

istration, after a brief stopover as deputy director of national intelligence—is rarely a career intelligence officer. And before Hayden nobody had ever led both the N.S.A. and the C.I.A. Hayden had clearly impressed the politicians, made few powerful enemies among his colleagues, and avoided scandal. In short, he was an excellent bureaucrat, and he spent his entire professional life guarding the country's secrets, among them some of the deepest and darkest.

"Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror" (Penguin Press) suffers from the usual problems of the official memoir. All autobiographies are self-serving, but those of public figures tend to be unapologetically so. Hayden includes liberal excerpts from a graduation speech he delivered at his alma mater, Duquesne University, and reports on the standing ovation that greeted him. "Playing to the Edge" is also badly written, with no trace of a ghostwriter or editor. Hayden is a devout Steelers fan, and his style is jock-bureaucratic—tough talk clotted with insider terminology. At one point, he writes, "I have spent my adult life working in American intelligence. It has been quite an honor. Generally well resourced. A global mission. No want of issues. And it was a hell of a ride." At another: "The head of operations wanted to try the Thin Thread approach, retain US metadata that we were collecting in our foreign intelligence activities, encrypt it, limit access to it through a kind of 'two key' protocol, and then (when indicated) chain through the metadata to other contacts."

This matter of language is important. Professional jargon—on Wall Street, in humanities departments, in government offices—can be a fence raised to keep out the uninitiated and permit those within it to persist in the belief that what they do is too hard, too complex, to be questioned. Jargon acts not only to euphemize but to license, setting insiders against outsiders and giving the flimsiest notions a scientific aura. Repeat the phrase "chain through the metadata" enough times and it sounds like a law of nature rather than a contentious policy. In the case of the intelligence world, where a high degree of insularity is essential, the cloak of language renders spooks and their civilian critics mutually alien. The tendency on each side is to deny that

the other has any real right to exist.

Hayden was running the N.S.A. when, following September 11th, President Bush told the agency to intercept the content of certain calls between American and foreign telephones without a court order, and to store all the metadata on calls made to, from, and within the United States. Hayden asked an agency lawyer for an overnight legal opinion and got an answer ("a more-than-plausible theory about its lawfulness") that a more skeptical mind could have shredded. But Hayden also knew exactly what his superiors at the White House wanted. He had the tools and was eager to use them. You don't rise to the top of the intelligence community by asking whether "can" and "should" are always the same.

This proved the case with torture, too. Hayden wasn't yet at the C.I.A. when the agency, with the backing of the Bush White House and the Justice Department, tried waterboarding and other physical efforts to break Al Qaeda suspects in secret overseas prisons. By the time Hayden took over, many, though not all, of the practices had ended. Contemplating an order to subject a detainee named Muhammad Rahim al-Afghani to sleep deprivation and a liquid diet, Hayden writes, "I remember staring down at the page, pen in hand, hesitating to take that step." Needless to say, he signed. Afghani's interrogators got nothing useful from their prisoner; Hayden suggests that this was because the harshest techniques had by then been taken off the table.

Hayden insists that vital information about Al Qaeda came from these techniques. He's contradicted by a thick Senate Intelligence Committee report, numerous journalistic investigations, and the accounts of certain intelligence officers. When it comes to detainee deaths, innocent men wrongfully held in brutal conditions, and other abuses, Hayden barely glances over his shoulder: "There were occasional mistakes." On the usefulness of the N.S.A.'s Terrorist Surveillance Program, which some insiders have dismissed as producing little valuable information, Hayden is similarly confident: "We were able to brief real connections between overseas terrorists and people in the United States.... It is clear that *Stellarwind*"—the code name for the information collected under the program—"covered a quadrant where

we had no other tools. What could be wrong with that?" The public may never be able to assess where the truth lies.

**I**N HIS LAST days in government, at the start of the Obama Administration, Hayden fought bitterly against the release of the Bush Justice Department's torture memos, insisting that the revelations constituted a betrayal and would damage C.I.A. officers' morale beyond repair. In 2014, when the Senate Intelligence Committee released its report, which singled out Hayden for misleading the committee in many instances, he lashed out even more furiously. The report is a damning document on the brutality of the C.I.A.'s practices, the shoddiness of its management, and the mendacity of its leaders. Hayden's case against the report comes down to the fact that it was written by the committee's "Democrat" members and staff. Hayden seems more ambivalent about eavesdropping than about torture. He admits that *Stellarwind* "did indeed raise important questions about the right balance between security and liberty, and Snowden's disclosures no doubt accelerated and intensified that discussion." And last week he sided with Apple in its privacy dispute with the F.B.I. But techniques like waterboarding and rectal hydration raise no questions for Hayden.

He has a number of glowing things to say about George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, none about Barack Obama. Bush is a good listener, avid for details, ready to hear hard truths from his intel people and make policy accordingly. Obama, on the other hand, is indecisive, hypocritical, and—on issues like torture and negotiating with Iran—wrong. Hayden devotes far more energy to answering critical coverage in the *Times* and the *Washington Post* than to analyzing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In general, he doesn't care for investigative journalists or congressional Democrats. First-rate intelligence reporters like the *Times'* James Risen, the *Post's* Dana Priest, and this magazine's Jane Mayer aren't just a pain in the ass, in his view—they have low motives and unfair agendas. He can't fathom why the legitimate role of the press might be to ferret out secrets that officials like him are sworn to guard, or why the C.I.A.'s destruction of its own interrogation tapes looked like a coverup of a crime. Con-

gresswoman Nancy Pelosi and Senator Ron Wyden aren't good-faith critics of the agency—they're partisan hypocrites. At one point, Hayden quotes a line from Bob Dylan's "Absolutely Sweet Marie": "To live outside the law, you must be honest." Hayden adds, "Especially with yourself. All the time." In other words, if the intelligence agencies are going to push the limits of law, policy, and technology, with minimal oversight—if they're going to use the sidelines, in the football metaphor of the book's title—they need to hold themselves accountable. But Hayden's unwillingness to give an inch to any challenge shows why Congress, the press, and the public are the only ones who can keep the agencies honest.

What's strange is that Hayden knows this. He knows that the intelligence world is isolated from the public, and that, like so many other institutions, it has lost Americans' trust. He seems to understand that keeping the senior Republicans and Democrats on the intelligence committees informed while imposing a gag order on them is no longer enough to win citizens' confidence. He goes so far as to call this realization "Snowden's 'gift,'" referring to him as the "visible effect" of a "broad cultural shift that is redefining legitimate secrecy, necessary transparency, and what constitutes the consent of the governed."

This is ultimately why Hayden has come out of the shadows to write this still heavily shadowed book. He wants more openness, not out of any principled belief in government transparency but because it's essential if his profession is going to survive. "If we are going to conduct espionage in the future," he writes, "we are going to have to make some changes in the relationship between the intelligence community and the public it serves." And, he adds, "we also need to explain to those with whom we intend to be more open that with that will come some increased risk. It can be no other way." He isn't wrong to say so, or to point out the bad faith of the agencies' detractors who want to have it both ways. After quoting passages from a congressional report critical of the N.S.A.'s failure to do more to prevent 9/11, he adds, "I mention them here only to point out that what then followed, NSA's *Stellarwind* program, was a logical response to an agreed issue and not the product of

demented cryptologic minds, as some would later suggest." You don't have to be an admirer of warrantless wiretapping to acknowledge that it might have originated in an understandable panic about the intelligence failures that permitted the attacks to happen. "Far easier to criticize intelligence agencies for not doing enough when [political élites] feel in danger," Hayden writes, "while reserving the right to criticize those agencies for doing too much when they feel safe." The truth in this observation isn't weakened by the fact that Hayden repeats it elsewhere at least twice, nearly word for word.

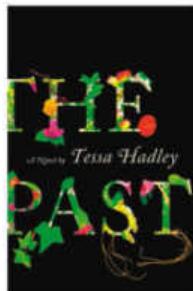
Hayden isn't the mindless drone or sinister spy boss that his harshest detractors might believe. He's a very imperfect bearer of a legitimate insight: that, if the American people and the intelligence world need each other, they can't afford to speak mutually unintelligible languages. Imperfect because he failed his own standard of openness, first while in government—he battled any serious oversight of the intelligence agencies' most controversial programs—and then again in this cheerful, overconfident account of his years there. George Tenet, in his more readable memoir, "At the Center of the Storm," spends a lot of time on his mistakes, especially on Iraq's missing weapons of mass destruction. Hayden, by contrast, looks back and says, "I could be accused of grading my own work, but I believe that despite our flaws, we're actually pretty good at this spy stuff."

Hayden thinks that the answer to the intelligence community's isolation and disarray is for leaders like him to come forth and explain their work—which is what he's been doing since his retirement, in speeches and articles and debates (including one with Glenn Greenwald), and, now, in this memoir. He wants transparency, sort of (another official called it "translucence"), but on his own terms. That won't be enough, and perhaps nothing will be enough. In a sense, the more the spies say, the less the public will trust them, because it's secrecy that gives them the mystique of knowledge. The relationship is a little like that between teenagers and their parents. We expect the intelligence people to keep us safe, we resent them for their intrusions and their failures, and we need to believe that they know better than we do in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. ♦

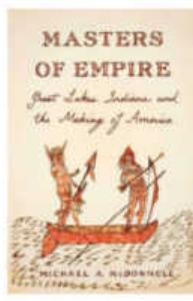
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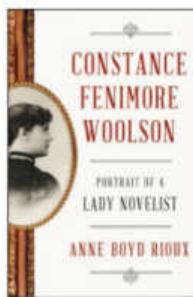
**Mr. Splitfoot**, by Samantha Hunt (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). This gripping novel alternates between two story lines: in one, the budding con artists Nat and Ruth struggle to survive in an abusive Christian foster home; in the other, set some years in the future, Ruth, inexplicably rendered mute, leads her niece, Cora, on a journey across New York State on foot. The narratives, which twist together into a shocking dénouement, are marked by ghost stories, from Nat and Ruth's forays into the world of mediums and séances to Cora's struggle to piece together her aunt's past. "History holds up one side of our lives and fiction the other," one character tells Cora, and the novel's pleasures lie in the intersections between the two.



**The Past**, by Tessa Hadley (Harper). An extended family of four adult siblings, with various partners and children, convenes for a final holiday before selling their country home, a storybook English cottage, spotted with damp and beyond the reach of cell-phone towers. Hadley conjures a heady, light-infused summer, its skies "dense with seed floss, transparent-winged midges, pollen." The atmosphere is languid yet busy, with flirtations and quests to unearth family matters that some would rather forget. Each person's hope for self-invention is challenged by evidence that character may have been fixed long ago. "People weren't 'really' anything," one speculates, unsure whether she wants it to be true or not. "There wasn't ever any final, definitive version."



**Masters of Empire**, by Michael A. McDonnell (Hill & Wang). This revisionist history makes a compelling case for the overwhelming power of the Anishinaabeg tribes of the Great Lakes region throughout the Colonial period. Their military might, diplomacy, and vast, intricate trading networks commanded deference from European traders, officials, and missionaries. The French in particular became completely enmeshed in Anishinaabeg affairs. Women from the Odawa, an Anishinaabeg tribe, married French fur traders to extend the Odawa's economic reach, and when the French were vanquished in the French and Indian War, Pontiac's Rebellion, named after an Odawa chief, kept the victorious British at bay. This halted the westward expansion of settlements, and the resulting frustration became one cause of the American Revolution.



**Constance Fenimore Woolson**, by Anne Boyd Rioux (Norton). A portrait of Woolson, a popular novelist, that appeared on the cover of *Harper's Weekly* in 1887 hid much of her face. "I do not at all think that because a woman happens to write a little," Woolson said, she "becomes the property of the public." The portrait, Boyd Rioux argues in this timely biography, was a calculated compromise, of a kind that Woolson made throughout her life. Choosing writing over marriage, she fought her way into a hostile field with stark stories of life on a vanishing Midwestern frontier. Her work earned her recognition from luminaries like Henry James, but few ever saw her as anything but a "woman writer," a designation she disliked. Boyd Rioux captures Woolson as she saw herself: as a "serious artist."

# THE STRUGGLE

*Macklemore wrestles with his place in hip-hop.*

BY HUA HSU



**I**N 2005, THE Seattle rapper Macklemore released his débüt album, “The Language of My World.” Its impact was modest, confined mostly to the Northwest. In a song titled “White Privilege,” he examined the tensions of his life as a white rapper: “Where’s my place in a music that’s been taken by my race/Culturally appropriated by the white face?” It was an honest, questing attempt to face the guilt of the gentrifier, wary of what he embodies yet pleased with the new view. The song also seemed to suggest that Macklemore was somehow different, blessed—or burdened—with slightly more self-consciousness than other white hip-hop artists or fans. “So where does

this leave me?/I feel like I pay dues but I’ll always be a white MC/I give everything I have when I write a rhyme/But that doesn’t change the fact that this culture’s not mine.” In the end, Macklemore resolves to keep walking the world aware of his privilege, hopeful that his listeners will do the same. On an album with songs ranging from attacks on George W. Bush to mischievous tales of scoring a fake I.D., it didn’t seem like a contradiction that required resolution.

Not at the time, at least. It’s easy to envision what would have happened had Macklemore’s trajectory as an independent artist plateaued then. He would have cobbled together a long career as a

*Appropriation is a blunt charge, but Macklemore now seems like its poster child.*

witty, well-meaning rapper, playing shows at colleges and festivals in front of committed fans who related to him and his thematic concerns.

Instead, Macklemore became very famous. The year after the release of “The Language of My World,” he began working with the Seattle producer Ryan Lewis, who brought a pop sheen and a knack for big choruses to Macklemore’s impassioned rhymes. In 2012, they released two wildly popular singles: “Same Love,” a soft-lit ballad that was adopted as an informal theme song for Washington’s campaign to legalize same-sex marriage, and “Thrift Shop,” a bargain shopper’s manifesto that doubled as a goofy, self-deprecating play on hip-hop’s boastful style. These hits resulted in the rediscovery of “Can’t Hold Us,” a relentlessly upbeat motivational anthem with the energy of a small star going nova.

The three singles appeared on “The Heist” (2012), an immensely successful album that seemed to exist at a distance from the hip-hop mainstream. It’s the kind of thing you might hear at spin class or on alternative-rock radio. The songs’ crossover success was, at least in part, the result of an unusual agreement that Macklemore and Lewis entered into with Warner Music Group: they released the album themselves, but they drew on the label’s promotional resources in exchange for a percentage of the album’s sales. At the 2014 Grammy Awards, the duo won awards for Best New Artist and Best Rap Album, beating the beloved Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar both times. After the show, Macklemore posted a picture of a text he had sent Lamar, suggesting that he felt unworthy: “It’s weird and sucks that I robbed you.” His fans found the gesture sweet and earnest. But, for those who considered “The Heist” the work of an interloper, Macklemore became a villain.

These reactions stood in for a larger schism. Pop music has long relied on a dream of being a utopian space, capable of bringing people of disparate backgrounds together. It’s a belief that diversifying the charts—the mere act of being exposed to difference—can reshape society in some essential, if unquantifiable, way. In recent years, however, anxieties have grown around white artists who commit acts of cultural appropriation. Macklemore, in particular, has come to symbolize the potential whitewashing

of hip-hop. Appropriation is a blunt charge, and can become a never-ending game of gotcha. Cultures have always evolved through exchange and mixture. When we talk of appropriation today, however, we are really talking about power and access: about the politics of making—and listening to—music at a time when many people live by the *laissez-faire* attitude that we are entitled to one another's cultures, genres, stories. As if in response to this, recent releases, such as D'Angelo's "Black Messiah," Lamar's "To Pimp a Butterfly," and Beyoncé's "Formation," have luxuriated in creating spectacles of unmitigated blackness, reminding audiences that the global industries profiting from black culture would not exist without black people. This was the theme of a recent "Saturday Night Live" skit, in which clueless white people suddenly realize that Beyoncé—so adored that she often seems like the country's sole point of consensus—is black and somehow not "for" everyone.

ALL OF WHICH leaves Macklemore in a strange position. A desire to celebrate—but not too heartily—courses through his new album, with Ryan Lewis, "This Unruly Mess I've Made." It opens with "Light Tunnels," a return to that fateful night at the Grammys. Though Macklemore knows better than to buy into the spectacle of awards shows ("This feels so narcissistic/Dressed as a celebration to conceal it's a business"), he realizes that celebrity has given him a platform. In January, he and Lewis released "White Privilege II," a rambling, confessional Tumblr post of a song, which considers the place of the well-meaning white person in the age of Black Lives Matter.

There is something absorbing about its messiness, particularly in the way it manages to sample voices from across white America's ideological spectrum, with a self-doubting Macklemore in the middle. He wonders about his place at a Black Lives Matter rally and asks his predominantly white fans to do the same: "We take all we want from black culture, but will we show up for black lives?" Along the way, he sketches a structure of privilege that props up everyone from Darren Wilson, the police officer who killed Michael Brown, to the Australian rapper Iggy Azalea, whose use of black American slang often verges on the unintelli-

gible. Macklemore and Lewis launched whiteprivilege2.com, providing free downloads of the single and identifying the activists, educators, and fellow-musicians who helped them conceptualize the song.

"This Unruly Mess" is neatly split between pensive moments, like "White Privilege II," and cartoonish ones, like "Brad Pitt's Cousin," in which Macklemore claims that even his cat has more Instagram followers than you, a reminder of his penchant for writing vivid, slapstick lyrics that lend themselves to music videos. The playful videos for "The Heist," which were posted on Lewis's YouTube page, were a key to the duo's rise, and have now been viewed nearly 1.5 billion times. But "This Unruly Mess" is most fascinating as a document of Macklemore's quest for authenticity, from his earnest dissertation on structures of privilege to the personal demons of "Kevin," a spiky blues-funk number about a friend lost to a prescription-drug overdose. The sheer number of guests reminds listeners of his devotion to a purist underground that he has long since outgrown. Melle Mel, Grandmaster Caz, and Kool Moe Dee lend "Downtown" a touch of old-school joy, while KRS-One and DJ Premier bring a rugged credibility to the rags-to-riches dreams of "Buckshot." One of the best songs is "Need to Know," which features Macklemore and his former opening act, Chance the Rapper, sharing a wish to "go back to the day before I became famous overnight."

This means something entirely different to Chance, who in "Need to Know" remarks on how white fans now call him the N-word. The enduring question isn't whether Macklemore is guilty of appropriation. It's why he has become a figure of such scrutiny—what visions fans and detractors alike have projected upon a man so desperate to be an ally. There's a world of difference between "White Privilege II" and Miley Cyrus's twerking videos, or, at least, Macklemore would like to argue as much. Is it enough to name the privilege while profiting from it? If not, what more can he do? Macklemore wrote the butter-soft "Growing Up (Sloane's Song)" before the birth of his daughter. It's filled with sweet sentiments that make for cheesy music. Work hard at something you love, he tells her, "and eventually the world will change." It would be nice to think so. ♦



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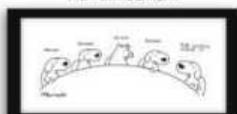
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## THE NIGHT CRAWLERS

*Down and out in Eugene O'Neill's "Hughie."*

BY HILTON ALS

I'M ALWAYS SOMEWHAT surprised to discover how many of the writers and thinkers I've admired over the years grew up reading Eugene O'Neill with a passion equal to my own. For years, I thought of O'Neill, who spoke so deeply to my adolescent self, as a kind of private pleasure. So I experienced something of a jolt when, in 2006, Joan Didion told me, during an interview, that as a girl she'd read all O'Neill's works in one summer, captivated by his theatricality. Mike Nichols, in a 2016 PBS "American Masters" program, described how much O'Neill meant to him, too. What impressed me, as I watched Didion's and Nichols's eyes light up at the thought of those maddening sexist, racist, restless, complicated, and important dramas, was how little either of them had in common stylistically with O'Neill's raw imperfections. And yet they responded to his narratives in their souls, as did I. O'Neill's words made me feel that working with your imagination was a noble calling somehow, and that any kind of story could work onstage if you strongly believed it belonged there. Even when reading his mystifyingly bad works, such as "The Fountain" (written 1921-22) or "Lazarus Laughed" (1926) or "Dynamo" (1928), I was in O'Neill's corner, fascinated by the way he illuminated his invented worlds with hysteria.

Of course, my interest in the art was inseparable from my interest in the artist—that melancholy boy with Black Irish looks, who grew up in a drama of his own. His father, James, was the headliner,

a ham actor, whose matinée-idol posturing and self-delusion prompted his brilliant son to run away and cook up a new kind of realism—fuelled by European-influenced ideas about angst and hopped up on the American vernacular. And then there was the high drama that his mother, Mary Ellen, a morphine addict, indulged



Forest Whitaker stars in O'Neill's last one-act play.

in. O'Neill's beloved older brother, James, Jr., or Jamie, inherited both forms of helplessness. An alcoholic sometime actor, he died in 1923, at the age of forty-five, but his depression, his wry humor, and his anguished relationship with his mother live on in a number of O'Neill's characters, including James Tyrone, Jr., in "A Moon for the Misbegotten" (1941-43)

and "Long Day's Journey Into Night" (1941-42).

In 1942, while working on those masterpieces, O'Neill also wrote his last one-act play, "Hughie" (in revival at the Booth, under the noteworthy direction of Michael Grandage). It was a period of personal turmoil. The playwright was fifty-three; his career was in decline. (From 1934 to 1946, O'Neill had no new plays produced.) In the midst of the war, writing seemed to him a trivial activity, the commercial theatre meaningless. More or less estranged from his children—he had no real gift for intimacy, just a near-obsessive drive to be close to women he'd rejected or who'd rejected him—O'Neill was also beginning to show signs of the brain disorder that led to his death, in 1953, at sixty-five. Nevertheless, "Hughie" signalled an up-swing in his artistic life. This hour-long song was intended to be one in a series of eight one-act plays, titled "By Way of Obit," in each of which a character would tell another about someone who had died. "Via this monologue, you get a complete picture of the person who has died—his or her whole life story—but just as complete a picture of . . . the narrator," O'Neill said. "And you also get, by another means—use of stage directions, mostly—an insight into the whole life of the person who does little but listen."

And listen the Night Clerk does—even before Erie Smith (Forest Whitaker) enters and starts talking about Hughie, who preceded the Night Clerk in his job. Sitting on a stool, facing the audience, the Night Clerk (played by Frank Wood, who is immense in a constricted part) "stares acquiescently at nothing" and listens. We hear what he seems to be listening to, not for: the car horns and footfalls of midtown Manhattan in 1928. It's approaching 4 A.M., what James Baldwin called the "devastating hour": the day "is indisputably over; almost instantaneously, a new day begins, and how will one bear it?" The Night Clerk bears it by letting sound,

atmosphere, time run through him like sand through an hourglass.

Erie bears it in another way. Our first sight of him tells us everything, or everything he wants his audience to know, which is how he treats the world—as spectators, potential pals he needs to win over in order to feel right in his mind. Entering through a heavy door, upstage center, Erie is tall, with rounded shoulders and a slightly shambling walk; he looks as though he were caving in on himself while trying to remain upright, spiritually and otherwise. We recognize him, or ourselves, in his effort to be sprightly, upbeat—to make life something other than what it is—even, or especially, in places like this dark, sad hotel lobby, which might as well be on the edge of the world. (Christopher Oram and Neil Austin, who have done a mighty job with the set and the lighting, respectively, have made the lobby look like a way station, the next-to-last stop before the elevator to the gallows.)

Catching sight of the new Night Clerk, Erie smiles a broader smile—it's part of his mask—and introduces himself. He's been on a drunk precipitated by Hughie's death, he says. Now the alcohol is wearing off, and perhaps reality is settling in just a little, and Erie stands at the center of what "Hughie" is about (in addition to O'Neill's nostalgia for the slang of the era): how you can be held captive by the guilt you feel at being alive. In any case, Erie is delighted that the hotel has replaced the "young squirt they took on when Hughie got sick. One of them fresh wise punks. Couldn't tell him nothing." It's probably fair to assume that that clerk put up a wall against Erie's

verbiage, and that Erie didn't take the rejection well. Now he's been given another chance to talk, to win a guy over and maybe love him, just as he loved Hughie, who was his anchor in a sea of booze and loneliness. When the Night Clerk mentions that his last name is Hughes—as was Hughie's—Erie gets excited, but then the Night Clerk points out that they weren't related. "No, that's right," Erie replies. He continues:

Hughie told me he didn't have no relations left—except his wife and kids, of course. Yeah. The poor guy croaked last week. His funeral was what started me off on a bat. Some drunk! I don't go on one often. It's bum dope in my book. A guy gets careless and gabs about things he knows and when he comes to he's liable to find there's guys who'd feel easier if he wasn't around no more. That's the trouble with knowing things.

That last sentence, such an honest response to one's own consciousness, slays us in the way that only O'Neill can; its subjectivity, its credibility remake the world for us, framing it with a proscenium and peopling it with Whitaker and Wood. Together and separately, they're more than fine actors; they're poets equal to O'Neill's poeticism. But this appreciation may be delayed. In fact, I wasn't sure what I thought of the show until a few days after I'd seen it. Perhaps, while watching, I was on guard against the possibility of O'Neill's occasional mawkishness interfacing with Whitaker's. But later, closing my eyes, I remembered Whitaker's light-colored suit and his gracefulness, which works in counterpoint to his outsized frame. For years, I didn't respond to Whitaker as much as I wanted to. In film after film, he played what I called Negro yearning: he was always on the out-

side looking in, especially at love. At times, this stance felt to me like special pleading. And I wasn't sure about his authenticity. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Whitaker didn't eschew sentimentality; in fact, he often hid behind it. Neil Jordan tempered that tendency in "The Crying Game" (1992), not by casting Whitaker against type but by making his type—his sensitivity and awkwardness—seem sexy to his transsexual partner. In "Panic Room" (2002), David Fincher revealed how attractive Whitaker could be when his performance as a thug had hints of melancholia and tenderheartedness without being subsumed by them. But in other films, such as "A Rage in Harlem" (1991) and "Bird" (1988), in which he starred as the jazz legend Charlie Parker, there was too much hazy nostalgia for Whitaker's softness to sink into. He was a junkie Teddy bear. Grandage, like Jordan and Fincher, emphasizes what's most interesting about Whitaker—his emotional accessibility, his curiosity about his own pain and that of the society that surrounds him—but he doesn't make Erie a nostalgic figure. There's critical distance here; Erie is a white character played by a black man, and the complications inherent in that casting keep the production contemporary and important.

Nothing significant happens in "Hughie" except theatre—and the creative lives of its actors. As Erie stands beside his new hope, the Night Clerk, while bent low, internally, by grief, Whitaker may remind you of Charles Laughton, another actor who was uncertain in his body and made a style out of trying to mask it, too. ♦

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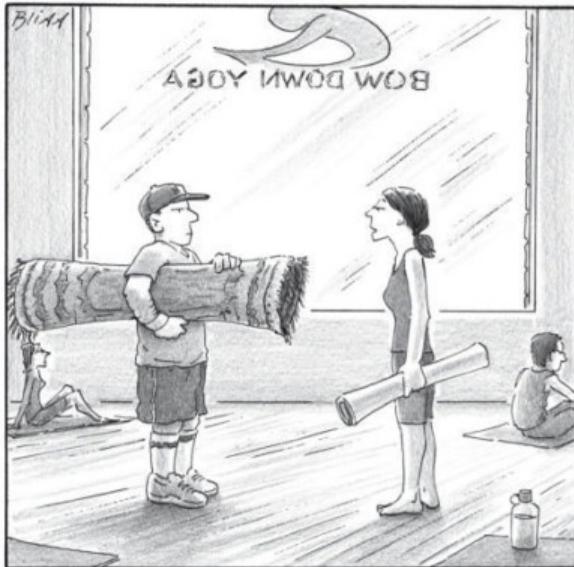
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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Harry Bliss, must be received by Sunday, March 6th. The finalists in the February 22nd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 21st issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the United States, Canada (except Quebec), Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

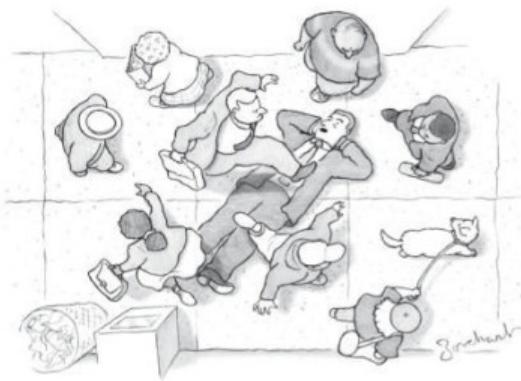
### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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### THE FINALISTS



*"I should have jumped from a higher floor."*  
Tom Robb, Vancouver, B.C.

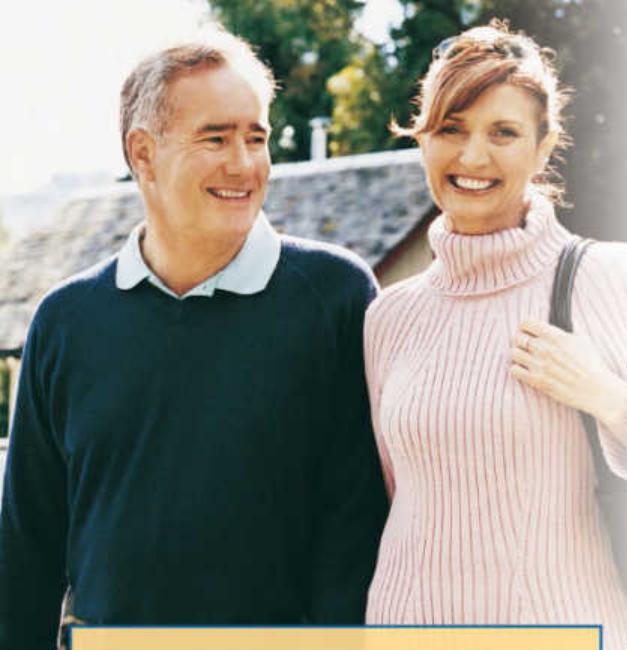
*"I'm a congressman—obstruction is my job."*  
Chase Gorland, New York City

*"Does this suit make me look flat?"*  
Calvin H. Allen, Asheville, N.C.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"Do you remember what you had for lunch last Thursday?"*  
Steven Genther, Miami, Fla.



# Chicago Doctor Invents Affordable Hearing Aid

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Reported by J. Page

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